



Tax Time Thursdays with Deacon Jim Shanahan of the Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington

Outreach to People Experiencing Homelessness

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Presented by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities' Get It Back Campaign

Presenters:

[Deacon Jim Shanahan](#) – Director, Financial Stability Network with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington

Financial Outreach to Serve Taxpayers Experiencing Homelessness

Deacon Jim Shanahan

- Background
 - Underserved communities each have their own unique barriers for asset building
 - Catholic Charities works to support people experiencing homelessness, refugees, people who were previously incarcerated, survivors of domestic violence, and people with disabilities
 - The influx of bussed-in immigrants from southern states puts additional urgency on DC homelessness issues
 - Deacon Jim went from working at a private accounting firm doing tax law, to volunteering in immigration law, to building the Financial Stability Network (FSN)
 - FSN is modeled after legal and health clinics and recruits professional volunteers to provide financial literacy training for free
 - Homelessness is a cycle – financial coaching is essential to help disrupt the cycle of homelessness and establish long-term asset-building
- Tax Credits and Poverty
 - EITC and CTC are major components of asset-building for people with lower incomes
 - There has been a growth of EITCs at the state level, especially in DC
 - VITA program was one of FSN's first projects; seen as an onramp to greater financial education including savings, employment, and asset protection
 - Many un/underemployed people believe they do not need to file – correcting this misunderstanding is essential since many may be eligible for refundable tax credits and can receive any overwithholding of income
 - Good news: the EITC and CTC are great asset-building opportunities

- Barriers

- **Lack of awareness:** many don't know the benefits of filing taxes and of available tax credits
 - Have tried a wide variety of outreach methods, including posters, social media, and [geo-fencing](#), but know still not reaching everyone
 - This is why Catholic Charities conducts community outreach year-round
- **Access to VITA programs:** mobile VITA sites brought to shelters have been very effective for year-round support
- **Lack of permanent addresses:** some organizations may allow their mailing address to be used on tax forms
 - If your organization cannot do this, identify community orgs that do
- **Lost documents:** IRS requires VITA programs to verify Social Security cards and photo ID cards, which are difficult for people experiencing homelessness to maintain
 - Have volunteers that help people secure these documents; organizations can help by keeping these documents on file for future use
- **Self-employment:** self-employment income itself is not a barrier, rather it can be difficult to determine net income
 - Volunteers help clients with creating a bookkeeping system and paying quarterly estimated payments
- **Missed Stimulus Checks:** many people are unaware that they can still qualify for Economic Impact Payments issued during the COVID pandemic
 - There was lots of confusion about incarcerated citizens eligibility
 - Catholic Charities is working with interns this summer to reach people before the deadlines
 - Important to stress the urgency in this work:
 - May 17, 2024, is the deadline to file for 2020 Economic Impact Payments (Stimulus Checks)
 - April 18, 2025, is the deadline to file for 2021 Economic Impact Payments (Stimulus Checks)
 - Note: the filing deadline to claim refunds is [three years from the original due date of the return](#). This applies to people who [never filed and people who filed and need to amend their tax return](#). The filing deadline was extended in 2020 and 2021.
- **Identity verification:** the IRS makes it difficult to verify identities by phone or in-person
 - Working with the Taxpayer Advocate Service to address this systemic issue

- Opportunities

- State EITCs are expanding to include individuals without SSNs, making immigrants with ITINs eligible
- Organizations can process ITIN applications as Certifying Acceptance Agents, overcoming high fee barrier and creating a one-stop-shop at VITA sites
 - Catholic Charities is doing this which helps people save money on fees other places charge to verify documents
- Connect clients with other services, including banking

- Encourage clients to have tax refunds direct deposited by setting up accounts at banks that follow [BankOn standards](#) for safe and affordable accounts, and to avoid banks using ChexSystems

Outreach & People Experiencing Homelessness: Key Takeaways

1. Mobile VITA sites play an important role in outreach and financial stability. These sites can reach homebound people (never send someone alone) and people without transportation. The costs of developing a mobile VITA site include equipment (hotspots, laptops, and a printer), renting/using a large vehicle or setting up tables, chairs and a tent outdoors, and retaining volunteers. Mobile sites can provide seasonal or year-round tax help for those who missed out on past tax credits. VITA also acts as an onramp to other aspects of financial stability and asset-building.
2. Offer holistic financial stability services – such as bank accounts – to help disrupt long-term issues within the cycle of homelessness. Promote bank accounts in tandem with VITA outreach. Organizations can prioritize banks that follow BankOn’s safe and affordable account standards. Bank accounts can be set up easily online. There is also value in taking clients to a brick-and-mortar bank to open an account.
3. Consider allowing clients who are hesitant to opening a bank account to use your organization’s address to receive their refund check. If your organization cannot do this, find a shelter, homeless resource center, faith-based group, or other agency that can. Organizations need clear and safe procedures to receive checks. People experiencing homelessness rarely have permanent addresses which is a major reason for encouraging bank accounts.
4. Use IRS transcripts as a problem-solving tool. Some people will require more support, especially if their return was rejected. You don’t need to be a CPA or tax lawyer to help and can start by being an advocate. Factors as simple as form filing errors and bureaucratic processes can lead to rejections. When the IRS transcript is not enough, the Taxpayer Advocate Service can help resolve issues.
5. Develop a multi-layered and creative outreach strategy to reach people who are unaware of tax credits and VITA. Posters, flyers, and geofencing have been attempted but still don’t reach everyone. Door-to-door outreach may be more effective. Ultimately, there isn’t one method that will reach everyone. Partnerships with local organizations in a variety of sectors can help spread awareness and can be valuable for reaching new people.

Audience Insights

- One audience member worked at a VITA site for several years and witnessed the importance of this work. They noticed VITA sites rejecting returns for people with no income, and so they instructed the preparers to enter \$1 as the income. This allowed forms to be submitted.
- One audience member emphasized that the trust factor is important. Who has the trust of homeless communities? Direct service workers and other trusted contacts can verify that the EITC and CTC are real money and that they really are eligible. “Build relationships with the people who have the relationships.”