

Interpreters make taxes easier for immigrants

Interpreters volunteer to help immigrants in north Everett decipher the tax code.

By Krista J. Kapralos
Herald Writer

EVERETT - Lyudmila Bogeta paid \$50 last year to have her taxes prepared at the office of a national chain in Everett.

Bogeta, a Russian-speaking immigrant, is a single woman who cares for her elderly mother.

To her, like many refugees and immigrants in Everett's diverse northeast neighborhoods, every penny counts.

When a friend told her about a new United Way program that offers free tax help with interpreters available for the neighborhood's most-spoken languages, Bogeta jumped at the chance.

Last week, she sat next to Boriana Helmick, a Bulgarian immigrant and volunteer Russian interpreter. Together, the pair filled out standard tax documents. They searched for credits and refunds that confound people who speak English and are pure Greek to those who don't.

"I've seen lots of happy people," Helmick said.

They're happy because many are walking away with unexpected tax refunds - some to the tune of several thousand dollars.

Snohomish County residents qualify for an estimated total of \$25 million from the Earned Income Tax Credit, but about \$10 million goes unclaimed each year, United Way of Snohomish County officials say.

Two years ago, the nonprofit agency searched for a way to best help the region's poorest families.

Statistics from the Brookings Institution about the millions of dollars that those families could be receiving convinced United Way officials that the county needs more free tax preparation sites.

"We need to get that money into their pockets," said Deborah Squires, vice president of impact and marketing for United Way of Snohomish County.



Kevin Nortz / The Herald

Volunteer Terry Fellers helps Francisco Dominguez of Everett with his taxes last week. "It's a blessing for me," Dominguez said.

The project took two years to take root.

First, Lynne Springer, United Way's community investment manager, led a team to conduct a detailed study of the county. They determined that the north Everett neighborhoods around the Boys & Girls Club on Poplar Street most desperately needed help to get their earned tax breaks.

"This ZIP code has the largest quantity of individuals at or below the poverty level," she said.

United Way collected \$22,000 in donations for the project from Bank of America, the EverTrust Foundation and Moss Adams, an accounting business. Springer estimates that the total cost of the site will be about \$25,000.

North Everett is home to the county's most concentrated refugee community, experts say. Springer and Squires gathered 45 volunteers fluent in eight different languages, including Spanish, Russian and Arabic.

The site opened in January. During the first two weeks, more than half of the 105 people who walked in did not speak English. Sixty-eight tax returns were filed with refunds totaling more than \$140,000. About \$73,000 of that money was due to the Earned Income Tax Credit.

A single mother with an annual income of \$11,000 walked out with more than \$4,000 from the credit, said Bob LaBouy, a retired Internal Revenue Service employee who is United Way's tax site manager.

"If she had filed on her own, she probably wouldn't have looked to calculate that," he said.

United Way officials hope to expand the program to more sites around the county next year.

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Get help with your taxes

A free tax-preparation site offered by United Way of Snohomish County is located at The Boys & Girls Club at 2316 12th St. in Everett. Everyone is welcome, regardless of income.

Hours are as follows:

- **5 to 8 p.m. on Tuesdays**, offering Arabic and Spanish interpreters.
- **10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays**, offering Chinese, German, Russian, Bulgarian and Spanish interpreters.
- **5 to 8 p.m. on Thursdays**, offering Vietnamese interpreters.
- **10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays**, offering Chinese, Japanese and Russian interpreters.

Appointments are not required. People are asked to arrive at least 45 minutes before closing time.