

The Tuscaloosa News

University of Alabama tax service sees its impact

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By Tommy Stevenson

TUSCALOOSA | In less than five years, SaveFirst, an initiative of the Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility at the University of Alabama and Impact Alabama, has become the largest campus-based free tax preparation service in the country, according to Stephen Black, the director of the center.

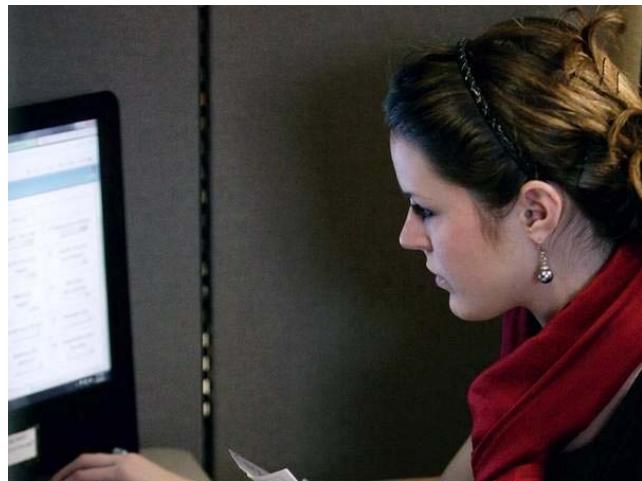
“To set up a program like this, you have to work closely with the (Internal Revenue Service) and they told me we now have the largest such program in the country,” he said.

“There are dozens of colleges and universities that provide free tax services, but most of them don't have nearly the number of volunteers we do. We are really proud of this. Our services are aimed at the working poor who are sometimes taken advantage of by commercial tax preparation businesses that charge fees and sometimes interest on refunds.”

The Center for Ethics works with Impact Alabama, a nonprofit incorporated by Black in 2004 with offices in Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, to get student volunteers involved in various community service initiatives. SaveFirst, the tax preparation initiative, operates at community-based sites throughout the state. It enlists undergraduate and graduate students, who are certified by the IRS, to assist low-income families with their tax returns and provide them with information that can help them make sound financial decisions.

The tax services are available to families with children that have a household income less than \$50,000 and individuals making less than \$20,000 a year, said Christa Waldrop, an Impact Alabama spokeswoman.

Last year, more than 500 students prepared tax returns for more than 3,500 families across the state. The students came from 10 Alabama colleges and universities and in the six weeks leading up to the April 15 deadline, \$6.8 million in tax refunds were secured for families who took advantage of the program.



Michelle Lepianka Carter | Tuscaloosa News

Mallory White, a first year volunteer for SaveFirst, works on a client's taxes at the Tuscaloosa Housing Authority at Rosedale Court on Wednesday. Save First is an initiative of Impact Alabama.

Waldrop said her organization estimates the people they helped saved more than \$1 million in commercial tax preparation fees.

In Tuscaloosa, where students have been working out of the Tuscaloosa Housing Authority offices in Rosedale Court since the inception of the initiative, a second center was opened recently at the Holten Heights Church of the Nazarene.

The cramped Rosedale office was buzzing with activity one day last week as about a dozen students huddled with clients.

“It gets busy, but it will get even busier at the end of the month, because employers have until Jan. 31 to send out wage forms to their workers,” said Ynhi Thai, the Holt site coordinator, who was helping out at Rosedale.

Thai said the Rosedale site opened Jan. 17 and the Holt site on Jan. 24.

“Practically every one of the low-income individuals and families we see are entitled to tax refunds, sometimes in the thousands of dollars,” she said.

“And we are seeing the same people every year, so we know we are having some success. Last year, we served more than 600 people at this site, but I imagine it will be higher this year as the word spreads and certainly higher for Tuscaloosa with the new site in Holt.”

Thai said clients come “from all over — we recently had one drive all the way from Eutaw to get us to fill out his tax return.”

She said the program tries to spread the word about the free services by mailing out reminders to those who have used it before and depend on word of mouth for new clients.

Glynnis Ritchie, the Rosedale site coordinator, said more than 400 students on the UA campus have been trained to help with the program, while more have also been trained on other campuses across the state.

She said she has had only had one client who ended up owing the government money.

“Most of them walk away with several thousand dollars,” Ritchie said. “It’s really a nice place to work, especially when you get single moms who have a lot of kids and it is really exciting to help them, because you know they are struggling all year long.”

Melissa Carr, who drives a school bus as well as buses for the University, is such a single parent.

“This is my third year to come here,” she said as a student crunched numbers on the other side of a small table. She said it was “really expensive” in the past to pay for commercial tax preparers.

“You don’t have to pay anything here,” she added. “And you get money back.”

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