

Group offers assistance calculating, filing taxes

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A refugee from war in Liberia, Yemah Jartu was happy to be in the United States and working as a cashier at Lindbergh Field. But she was unprepared for tackling an often vexing part of the American experience: filing a federal income tax return.

"It was really strange," Jartu, 20, remembered musing over the various withholding numbers on the W-2 income statement. "I was kind of confused."

Many Americans who have paid for decades still can be confounded, too, but Jartu, who arrived here from West Africa last September, heard about a ready source of help. The International Rescue Committee's San Diego office calculates and files tax returns free for refugees. Jartu is due a modest refund, too.



NELVIN CEPEDA / Union-Tribune
After the volunteers worked through tax questions with the refugees, they filed online, most finishing in less than hour, said DiPretoro, an AmeriCorps recruit assigned to the IRC.

She is among more than 100 political and war refugees from Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia who turned to the refugee resettlement assistance organization in Normal Heights and collectively received \$108,403.

"That is a direct result, back into the community and the hands of working refugees," said Kasra Movahedi, who directs the IRC program.

Having finished its fourth year, the program saves refugees the frustration of negotiating the arcane jargon of the Internal Revenue Service tax code, a situation often amplified for refugees by uncertainty over their responsibilities and by language barriers. They also are spared the fee they would have to pay a professional tax preparer.

"IRC has seen this as a great way to help our clients develop assets," Movahedi said.

Too often, preparers charge high fees, he said, and lure naive refugees with tempting instant loans against their future refunds but at exorbitant interest rates.

Sparghai Nasim, 21, a refugee from Afghanistan, has used the committee's free service for three years.

The breadwinner in a household that includes her two younger sisters and their mother, Nasim attends Grossmont College in preparation for medical school while also working as a customer service representative. She perused an IRS brochure this tax season, but after a couple of pages, decided – as many Americans might agree – "It looks complicated. It's really tedious."

Scott DiPretoro, a tax counselor at the IRC, said most refugees do not attempt to master the perplexing tax procedures. "Why would they want to?"

On two recent Wednesday evenings and two Saturdays mornings, refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Russia, Vietnam and Laos, showed up at the IRC offices with W-2 wage receipt forms in hand and hopeful notions of a possible refund. They sat before computer screens with one of 10 volunteers who had had a training session in the fundamentals of federal and California income tax filing.

After the volunteers worked through tax questions with the refugees, they filed online, most finishing in less than hour, said DiPreto, an AmeriCorps recruit assigned to the IRC.

Most refugees are working poor and qualify for an Earned Income Credit in their tax return – a federal incentive payment to low-income people who work rather than simply rely on public assistance.

Many immigrants hear about the tax service when they visit IRC for the other services it offers, from job training or help finding housing to filing immigration papers or providing modest loans for businesses. The tax program was started at IRC's New York headquarters to help refugees establish financial independence.

At the San Diego office, 57 returns filed were for individuals, the remainder for couples or heads of households. Three-quarters of them were first-time tax filers, said Movahedi, the IRC program director.

The filings were wrapped up weeks before today's deadline. Even so, the topic of taxes keeps coming up when refugees stop by the office, DiPreto said, adding, "They want to know when they're getting their refund."

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