

Keep refunds in hands of earners

San Antonio's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program has bragging rights for being the largest group of Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) volunteers in the country, reports business writer David Hendricks. San Antonio is lucky to have them.

There were 345 preparers ready to start work when the program launched and another 541 volunteers are finishing up their certification training. The program has recruited a total of 1,148 volunteers and will continue to train them as the tax filing season progresses.

The program operates with the support of the Catholic Charities of the Archdioceses of San Antonio, Inc., United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County and the city of San Antonio. It helped process 44,000 income tax returns last tax season. The effort meant \$60 million in refunds and credits went directly to the taxpayers.

This tax year some families may see a delay in their tax refunds due to recently enacted tax laws aimed at detecting and preventing tax fraud. The IRS is now required to hold the refunds of taxpayers claiming earned income tax credits and child tax credits until Feb. 15. A substantial number of tax filers in San Antonio will be affected by the new rules. More than one-third of the money refunded through VITA prepared filings in San Antonio went to families who qualified for the tax relief.

This time of year we see a proliferation of seasonal pop-up tax preparation businesses offering their services and enticing prospective customers with high-fee anticipation loans on tax refunds. Consumers should not fall prey. The price tag on the services offered by VITA cannot be beat.

The tax filing deadline this year is Tuesday, April 17, due to a federal holiday. Information on the locations for the free tax preparation services can be obtained by dialing 211.