

Miami Herald

Free tax help available for Miami-Dade residents

BY NICHOLAS NEHAMAS - NNEHAMAS@MIAMIHERALD.COM

01/30/2015 6:03 PM | Updated: 01/30/2015 7:30 PM



Wilfredo Roca (L) seeks help filing his taxes from Maria Eisenhart, assistant director at the City of Miami Department of Community & Economic Development and a volunteer in a free county-wide tax assistance program, at City Hall on Thursday. NICHOLAS NEHAMAS / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Scared of filing your taxes? Free help is now available to four out of five Miami-Dade residents.

Local community groups have staffed more than 50 locations around the county with trained volunteers, thanks to a \$92,000 grant from the Internal Revenue Service.

At a City Hall press conference Friday, Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado urged local residents to take advantage of the opportunity.

"This is about helping ... people who understand that in order to achieve the American dream they have to live within the system," Regalado said.

Some came that very day.

"Filing my taxes has never been easy," said Wilfredo Roca, 63. "I find taxes intimidating."

Roca said he goes to H&R Block, a private tax preparer, when he can afford it. This year, work was scarce. "I'm in the cycle of being underemployed and unemployed," said Roca, an electrical technician who wants to start driving Uber cars for extra cash.

A city staffer asked Roca questions about his income as she helped him fill out forms in a back room. "I just want to make sure everything's right," he said. "Who wants the government coming after you?"

Last year, volunteers — who range from college students to professional accountants — helped Miami-Dade residents file about 6,400 tax returns and collect nearly \$7.7 million in refunds, said Javier Diaz of Branches, a local nonprofit that oversees the volunteer initiative.

About 4,500 of the taxpayers helped last year spoke limited or no English, Diaz said. Assistance is available in Spanish and Creole.

Households that make less than \$60,000 per year are eligible for free help, as are the elderly, people with disabilities and those who don't speak fluent English. That includes about 80 percent of people in the county, according to an analysis of IRS data by the United Way Center for Financial Stability.

This year, the Miami Marlins have joined the effort, and residents can go to the ballpark for help. Other locations include several campuses of Miami Dade College, the United Way Center for Financial Stability, Jose Marti Park in Little Havana and Corpus Christi church in Allapattah.

Some events will include federally licensed "navigators" who can help sign consumers up for health coverage under the Affordable Care Act, said Brent McLaughlin, executive director of Branches, who also spoke at the press conference.

Another speaker, United Way of Miami president Harve Mogul, stressed the importance of consumers seeking one refund in particular: the Earned Income Tax Credit.

In Florida, more than 2 million people received a total of \$5.1 billion last year through the tax credit, which is designed to help the working poor.

The average refund is about \$2,400, according to the IRS. A couple with two children making less than

\$50,000 per year could receive a refund up to \$5,460.

“The Earned Income Tax Credit program is probably responsible for lifting more out of poverty than any other program that has ever been put together by our government,” Mogul said.

FIND A VOLUNTEER

To find a volunteer location near you, call 800-906-9887 or visit: <http://irs.treasury.gov/freetaxprep/>
(<http://irs.treasury.gov/freetaxprep/>)
