Delayed Refund VITA Communications Campaign: Messaging Strategies and Tools for VITA Programs

November 18, 2016
1-2:30pm ET; 10am-11:30am PT

CFED.ORG/PROGRAMS/TAXPAYER OPPORTUNITY NETWORK/
Welcome

Carmen Shorter
Senior Manager for Learning, Field Engagement
CFED
Housekeeping

- This webinar is being recorded and will be available online within one week.
- All webinar attendees are muted to ensure sound quality.
- **Ask a question any time** by typing the question into the text box of the GoToWebinar Control Panel.
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Trouble dialing in?
Just listen through your computer with speakers or headphones!
Keys to Success on Today’s Webinar

- Join from a quiet space
- Grab a coffee or snack and settle in
- Engage! Send us your questions and comments as you listen
- Create a watch party with your team to listen & learn together
Our mission at CFED is to make it possible for millions of people to achieve financial security and contribute to an opportunity economy.
How do we do it

We **push to expand** innovative practical solutions that empower low- and moderate-income people to build wealth.

We **drive policy change** at all levels of government.

We **support the efforts of community leaders** across the country to advance economic opportunity for all.
Taxpayer Opportunity Network Members...

• Participate in learning and advocacy opportunities
• Learn about the latest developments in the field
• Access valuable resources for volunteers, program managers and site coordinators
• Get discounts to Taxpayer Opportunity Network convenings

To join or learn more, go to: cfed.org/programs/taxpayer_opportunity_network
What’s in store for today?

• CFED/TON Perspective and Overview
• IRS, PATH Act, and the Get Ready Campaign
• Intuit Financial Freedom Foundation: Delayed Refund VITA Communications Campaign
• Glen Echo Group: Refund Delay Messaging for VITA
• Local Delayed Refund Perspective
• National Consumers League: National Media Campaign
• Prepare + Prosper: VITA Practitioner Perspective
• Q & A
• Close
Today’s Speakers

Rebecca Thompson  
Program Director  
Taxpayer Opportunity Network

Karin Rice  
Manager, Corporate and Executive Communications  
W&I Communications & Liaison  
Internal Revenue Service

Susan Mason  
Director  
Intuit Financial Freedom Foundation
Today’s Speakers

John Breyault
Vice President of Public Policy, Telecommunications and Fraud
National Consumers League

Aaron Alberico
Senior Associate
Glen Echo Group

Stacy Opitz
Communications and Marketing Director
Prepare + Prosper
TON Perspective and Overview

Rebecca Thompson
Project Director
Taxpayer Opportunity Network
IRS: Get Ready Campaign

Karin Rice
Manager, Corporate and Executive Communications
W&I Communications & Liaison
Internal Revenue Service
Get Ready Communications

• The IRS wants taxpayers to know about certain changes before filing season.
• A fall Get Ready campaign will focus on:
  — Raising awareness about the changes
  — Encouraging taxpayers to take steps now to ensure smooth processing of their 2016 tax return and avoid a delay in getting their refund next year
  — Equipping partners to help reach taxpayers
Get Ready Areas of Emphasis

- Renew expired ITINs now - processing delays likely for filers with expired ITINs
- Some Refunds must be held until Feb. 15
- Gather your tax records - Some taxpayers may need 2015 AGI to e-file
New ITIN Rules – Form W-7

• Documentation required for new Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs)
• Older ITINs will expire if not renewed
• Newer ITINs will expire if not used, unless renewed
• Form W-7 (Revision Sept. 2016)
• IRS will no longer accept passports of dependents as stand-alone documents that lack a date of entry into the United States.

IRC 6109
Some refunds must be held until Feb. 15

- No credit or refund for an overpayment ... shall be made to a taxpayer before Feb. 15 if the taxpayer claimed the Earned Income Tax Credit or Additional Child Tax Credit on the return.

IRC §6402(m)
Strengthening ID Verification on the Self-Prepared Return

- Taxpayers using a software product for the first time will need to use AGI to verify e-signature
- No changes to Practitioner PIN Method
- Electronic Filing PIN no longer an option for self-prepared returns
Get Ready Communications

Related communications to date:

- **Aug. 31:** IRS Urges Taxpayers to Check Their Withholding; New Factors Increase Importance of Mid-Year Check Up (PATH 201)
- **Sept. 22:** IRS Has a Reminder for Extension Filers: Prior-Year Adjusted Gross Income Amount May Be Needed to File Electronically
- **Oct. 6:** IRS Now Accepting ITIN Renewal Applications; Taxpayers Encouraged to Act Soon to Avoid Processing Delays in 2017
- **Oct. 7:** Tax-filing Extension Expires Oct. 17 for Millions of Taxpayers; Check Eligibility for Overlooked Tax Benefits (Keep copy of return)
- **Oct. 28:** Reminder: Employers Face New Jan. 31 W-2 Filing Deadline; Some Refunds Delayed Until Feb. 15
- **Nov. 4:** Renewing Your ITIN? Things You’ll Need
- **Nov. 16:** Tax Preparedness Series: How to Avoid a Refund Delay; Plan Ahead
- **Ongoing related Tweets, presentations, irs.gov content…**
Get Ready Communications

- Nov – Jan: Weekly News Releases, Tax Tips and Tweets
  - National and Local
- IRS.gov content (www.IRS.Gov/GetReady)
- Key messages included in IRS presentations
  - IRS and partner forums
- Equipping Partners to help reach taxpayers
- IRS Outreach Corner
- Other social media (coming soon)
Get Ready Communications

www.IRS.gov/GetReady

Take Steps Now for Tax Filing Season

Get ready today to file your 2016 federal income tax return.

Adjusted Gross Income (AGI)

What You Need to Know
- Some taxpayers using a software product for the first time may need to know their 2015 Adjusted Gross Income, or AGI, to e-file their 2016 tax return.

- When self-preparing your taxes and filing electronically, you must sign and validate your electronic tax return by entering your prior-year AGI or your prior-year Self-Select PIN. Using an electronic filing PIN is no longer an option.

What You Need to Do
- If you have a copy of your 2015 federal income tax return, your AGI is on line 37 of the Form 1040, line 21 on the Form 1040-A or line 4 on the Form 1040-EZ.

- Learn more about how to verify your identity and electronically sign your tax return at Validating Your Electronically Filed Tax Return.

Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN)

What You Need to Know
- Processing delays are likely for filers with expired Individual Tax Identification Numbers.

- There are two reasons an ITIN would expire December 31, 2016:
  - If you have not used your ITIN on a U.S. tax return at least once for tax years 2013, 2014 or 2015.

What You Need to Do
- You can renew your ITIN now if it expired and you plan to use it on a U.S. tax return.

- No action is needed by expired ITIN holders who don’t need to file a tax return next year.

- There are new documentation requirements when applying for renewing an ITIN for certain dependents.
Intuit Financial Freedom Foundation: Delayed Refund Communications Campaign

Susan Mason
Director
Intuit Financial Freedom Foundation
TY’16 Refund Delay Consumer Messaging and Communications

November 18, 2016
In the Beginning …

In July the Intuit Financial Freedom Foundation provided sponsorship funding to The Center For Financial Services Innovation (CFSI) work with a public relations and communications firm to develop key messages and an outreach strategy about the TY’16 refund delays and what low- and moderate-income taxpayers and the organizations serving them should be doing to prepare.

After interviewing the IRS and EITC and VITA experts from CFED, Center for Budget & Policy Priorities, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, United Way Worldwide, Pew, Urban Institute/Tax Policy Center, the Center for Economic Progress, and CFSI crafted high level, core messages to be tested with the public and an outline for the outreach campaign.

Interview experts ● Develop messages ● Test with consumers ● Roll out campaign
The Journey: Message Development

**A new law may impact your tax refund in 2017**

This is an extra measure to prevent against fraud and identity theft.

**Use IRS free resources in your community and online**

Visit IRS.gov and search VITA and Free File.

**No one can speed up your refund**

So don’t pay someone who promises they will.

**File when you normally file and if you file before February 15, plan ahead for a delay in your refund.**

The IRS issues most refunds in less than 21 days. Using e-file is the best way to file an accurate tax return and combining e-file with deposit is the fastest way for a taxpayer to get their refund.
The Journey: Message Testing with Consumers

1. #SOL

2. They want to hear about Delayed Refunds from the IRS, **not** from community agencies

3. LOW awareness of IRS tax prep resources although some clearly used them … and valued them

4. HIGH approval conceptually of VITA and Free File
The Journey: The Takeaways

**It is counterproductive for VITAs to proactively alert the public** about the refund processing delays or suggest taxpayers can do anything to prepare for the delays.

- Puts VITAs in a no-win situation; they become the bearer of bad news for a situation over which they have no control.

**Flip the strategy:** rather than use the Delayed Refund as the hook to talk about free tax assistance, use the increased national interest in tax time – due to delayed refund processing – to spread awareness of and build the brand of the IRS’ free resources in the community (VITA) and online (Free File).

**Focus on helping VITAs position themselves as the invaluable – and sometimes hidden – community resources they are**, helping people save money on tax prep and related fees especially at this time when it’s so important to prepare accurate returns and electronically file them for faster processing.
Glen Echo Group: Refund Delay Messaging for VITA

Aaron Alberico
Senior Associate
Glen Echo Group
The following messages are designed to help VITAs talk about the delay and position themselves as a resource to help navigate what it means for those impacted and how they can save money and claim 100% of their refund through free tax preparation services.

1. A new law requires the IRS to delay issuing refunds for certain taxpayers claiming the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) or the Additional Child Tax Credit (ACTC) until February 15. The law has no exceptions and is designed to make it easier for the IRS to find and stop fraud.

   - IRS should serve as the authority communicating the details of the delay.
   - VITAs should communicate the delay as the result of a “law” and position VITAs as a resource that can help navigate what it means for individuals.

2) In order to protect you, this IRS delay allows them to take the time necessary to review refunds for potential fraud. Tax identity fraud is one of the fastest-growing types of fraud and accounted for almost half of the 491,000 ID theft complaints filed with the Federal Trade Commission last year.
3) Our local community group is one of over 12,000 Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) programs across the country that the IRS relies on to help people file their taxes every year, completely free of charge.

- This next message pivots to a more positive message about VITAs and validates the programs by linking them to a national network.

4) In 2016 alone, our IRS certified volunteers helped thousands of individuals qualify for and keep 100% of their refunds—over millions of dollars—without worrying about hidden fees or unexpected charges.

- VITAs should localize information about the people helped and the money saved whenever possible. This information will resonate with local press and individuals far greater than abstract or national numbers.

- Refer to the generic press release for more information.
We are dedicated to helping as many community members as we can and encourage taxpayers to be wary of preparers promising faster refunds through expensive financial practices, like loans.

- We found in focus groups that those impacted would seek out alternative option to get their refund faster if necessary, so we’ve designed some language to help deter those alternatives, without shaming or patronizing those individuals we are trying to help.

The volunteers and staff tax preparers at our free tax preparation sites go through at least 15 hours of training and are certified by the IRS. We make sure our customers get high-quality, professional service from trained volunteers who are equipped to identify tax refund opportunities for customers.

- Market research conducted by Prepare + Prosper found that “IRS certified” is the preferred way of describing a preparer’s qualifications. We also emphasize that point, by talking about the time volunteers spend on training.
How we will deliver the message

1. Press release you can use locally

2. National media campaign by the National Consumers League

3. VITA video you can customize with your logo, contact information
National Consumers League: National Media Campaign

John Breyault
Vice President of Public Policy, Telecommunications and Fraud
National Consumers League
National Media

The National Consumers League (NCL) will lead a national communications campaign to help empower VITAs and promote IRS free taxpayer assistance services like local volunteer organizations and Free File.

This national media campaign will include:

• **Earned Media Outreach:** NCL will serve as the campaign’s national spokesperson working to spread the message online, in print and on TV. A component of this will include Spanish language outreach.

• **Owned Media:** NCL will leverage their own assets, networks and messaging practices to amplify the message on social media, in statements, blog posts and press releases, email alerts and on fraud.org and nclnet.org.

• **Third Party Outreach:** NCL will work with authoritative third party advocates to help us spread the word.

• **Paid Media Activities:** We are exploring paid media options to determine ways we can amplify our message through advertisements to reach the campaigns core consumers, those impacted by the EITC and ACTC delay.
• Prepare & Prosper
• Center for Economic Progress
• Baltimore CASH Campaign
• Maryland CASH Campaign
• Center for Budget & Policy Priorities
• CFED
• CFSI
Prepare + Prosper: VITA Practitioner Perspective

Stacy Opitz
Communications and Marketing Director
Prepare + Prosper
Poll

How do you plan to communicate about the EITC refund delay? Check all that apply.

- Press release
- Social media
- Community outreach
- Print/radio/other advertising
- Other? Tell us in the comments box!
Q & A

What questions do you have?

Share them in the Questions box!
Join the Network!

• Participate in learning and advocacy opportunities
• Learn about the latest developments in the field
• Access valuable resources for volunteers, program managers and site coordinators
• Get discounts to Taxpayer Opportunity Network convenings

To join or learn more, go to: cfed.org/programs/taxpayer_opportunity_network
Thank you!