

## Tax help arrives in Dallas County

By Alvin Benn • April 8, 2009

SELMA -- With the income tax filing deadline only a week away, Cathy Marsh needed help and hoped she wouldn't have to pay much to have it done.

What she discovered Tuesday at Wallace Community College Selma was a program that provides a free tax-preparation service.

"This is wonderful," said Marsh, a retired school lunchroom employee who watched as volunteer Hilliard Worthington worked on her income tax figures for 2008.

"I had to pay somebody \$189 to have it done last year and didn't get a refund back. In fact, I had to pay \$500 to the government."

A few hours later, Marsh happily reported that Worthington had prepared a federal tax return that netted her more than \$700 and a state return worth \$200 to her.

"I'm just thrilled by how much I've been helped today," she said. "I can't say enough about what this means to me."

U.S. Rep. Artur Davis, D-Birmingham, joined by executives of several agencies and organizations, outlined a program that offers free tax preparation and filing services for qualified wage earners who make up to \$56,000 annually.

The service provides assistance not only in filing tax returns, but in applying for the Earned Income Tax Credit of up to \$4,716.

Davis said many poor people around the country, especially in Alabama's Black Belt region, pay tax preparers "who don't have to be licensed, pass any educational requirements or prove they know what they're doing."

"All they have to do is put up a sign saying 'We Prepare Your Taxes,'" he said, adding that many who seek help are "low wage working families who are trying to get benefits. I hear about people who are paying their preparer more than they are getting back."

Davis thanked One Economy, Wal-Mart and United Way for sponsoring the free tax preparation service. He added that the preparers would be in Tuscaloosa and Birmingham

in the coming days. One Economy is a non-profit organization that helps low-income families.

The 7th District congressman also lauded the Legislature for working toward a law that would set forth stringent requirements to obtain a tax-preparation license.

He said the bill is quickly working its way through the House and Senate and appears to have a good chance of passing.

Officials from each of the organizations were on hand for the event and spoke about how the poor can contact them to obtain assistance.

"Mobile tax vans" have been traveling the country to inform residents of the free tax preparation programs and to warn them to be mindful of high fees being charged by some preparers.

"My constituents are in such dire straits," Davis said. "If this (program) can help them to receive the earned income tax credit without being ripped off in the process, that is, in itself, an important accomplishment."

Joining Davis for the event were Julie Garcia of the Internal Revenue Service, Howie Hodges of One Economy and Josephine Robinson of United Way of America.

For details about the free tax-preparation program and eligibility requirements, contact local United Way offices or call 866-869-4921.