



San Francisco Works to Support Working Families by Vivian Pacheco

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a federal tax benefit for low- and moderate-income workers that helps offset their tax burden and increase the returns to work. In 2005, the EITC helped lift 5 million people out of poverty, including 2.6 million children—in fact, the EITC lifts more children out of poverty than any other federal program. For some workers, the EITC can represent a 40 percent pay increase.¹

Yet, despite these benefits, between 15 and 25 percent of eligible families do not claim their EITC refunds—valuable dollars that can help low-income families make ends meet and help stimulate local economic activity.² In San Francisco, these unclaimed dollars add up to an estimated \$12 million.³ Recognizing the magnitude of these unrealized benefits, the City of San Francisco implemented the Working Families Credit (WFC) in 2005.⁴ This innovative program provides a local match to the federal EITC and was designed to increase awareness among low-income households and incentivize qualified residents to file EITC claims.

The WFC, one of the few, if only, city sponsored

EITC matches, has successfully demonstrated the potential of this type of program in raising awareness and uptake of the EITC. Between 2004 and 2007, more than 24,000 families received credits, amounting to \$6.7 million dollars in WFC funds that have gone to low-income families living in the City. In addition, according to Tara Cohen, Program Coordinator for the WFC, for every \$1 spent by the City to increase uptake, another \$24.15 in federal EITC funds are put back into the wallets of qualified working families. Originally, the WFC was funded partly by a grant from H&R Block, but these funds, along with other private sources, dried up when the pilot phase ended. As a result, the City has been forced to modify elements of the program from its original pilot phase structure. The program is no longer a public-private partnership; it is now a solely publically funded program, and the responsibility for program oversight shifted from the Office of the Treasurer to the City's Human Services Agency (HSA) in the tax year 2006. Mayor Newsom committed to an annual allocation out of the City's general funds for the WFC, making

the program part of the City's permanent safety net for low-income working families.

The City continues to allocate approximately \$1.4 million to the WFC program per year. But, less funding has led to a change in the WFC match. Now, WFC applicants receive a flat refund of \$100 per family, down from an average WFC refund of \$240 in prior years (which was calculated as a percentage of the EITC refund). The change in budget also significantly decreased the ability to market the program to a wide audience.

Realizing they have to do more with less, HSA has been working to develop ways to tie the WFC to other supports for low-income working families, such as ensuring that WFC recipients are fully enrolled in the programs and services for which they are eligible, from health insurance to utility bill discounts. While about 57% of WFC recipients are enrolled in other locally-run public benefit programs (ie. Medi-Cal, Food Stamps, CalWORKS), the City has previously not had an effective way to reach the remaining families to ensure that they are receiving the wide range of benefits for which they might qualify. Now, through the WFC program, the City can more easily connect families with other local services such as discounted bus passes, Food Stamps, health care, and programs that provide free-checking accounts or discounted computers. "This program helps families access benefits all year long, even though the Credit is heavily marketed during tax season," explained Ms. Cohen. The new universal \$100 credit simplifies program implementation and budgeting, as well as the marketing to the general public. The HSA has piloted targeted outreach strategies to WFC applicants to enroll them in programs and services through direct mail and phone contact.

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The WFC also prompted the City to develop and promote asset building strategies. In the first year of the program, the Treasurer was surprised to learn that a quarter of WFC applicants lacked a bank account or a relationship with a mainstream financial institution, and were taking their WFC checks to high-cost check cashers. This finding impelled the City to embark in developing and implementing the successful Bank on San Francisco program that works to remove the barriers for low- and moderate-income residents from obtaining a bank account, such as bad bank histories, lack of necessary identification, and the cost of maintaining an account.⁵ The WFC and Bank on San Francisco have



worked together to help recipients keep the full amount of their refund. Clients can open an account from a participating bank or credit union and collect their refund free of charge by cashing, depositing, or direct-depositing their refund in a financial institution.

The City is also experimenting with providing the \$100 credit in the form of a savings bond. The goal is to introduce a new savings product to working families. A savings bond usually pays about 5 percent interest—more than most savings accounts. During its debut year, fewer than 1% of WFC applicants chose the savings bond as a payment option. The low up-take of this option may point to a lack of familiarity with this product among the target population. Even so, the hope is that as WFC recipients learn more about this option, they will be encouraged to think about savings and choose to buy savings bonds in the future.

The City has also used the WFC to raise awareness of predatory products like refund anticipation loans (RALs) and payday loans. According to IRS data, in the 2003 tax year, 57 percent of RAL borrowers were EITC recipients. RALs are extremely costly to the customer because they include various fees such as a "risky loan" fee, administrative fees, tax preparation fees, and even a check cashing fee, in addition to the already high APR.⁶ A RAL can typically cost an EITC customer between 5 -13 percent of their refund, but can seem attractive because recipients get their money right away. However, the benefits of a RAL are diminished when there are alternatives like direct deposit and free tax preparation services that can shorten the process of the refund to 7-10 days without unnecessary fees. The WFC has worked to promote these alternatives and to develop a network of free tax preparation sites and banks willing to open accounts in target neighborhoods, competing against the businesses that actively promote RALs.

While on its face not enough to lift a family out of poverty, the City hopes that the \$100 WFC will leverage other important benefits for low-income families in San Francisco, and promote a wider range of asset building opportunities moving forward. **CI**

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