



RealSense
A United Way Initiative
WWW.REALSENSEJAX.ORG ■ 904-632-0600

For Immediate Release: July 21, 2009

Contact: Jeff Winkler, Director (904) 390-3207

Janet Owens, VP Mktg. & Comm., United Way (904) 390-3245 (o) (904) / 504-0434 (c)

Winkler Takes the Helm at RealSense

Former Assistant Director to Lead RealSense Prosperity Campaign

Jeff Winkler was recently appointed the new Director of RealSense Prosperity Campaign. Winkler previously served as Assistant Director of RealSense for three years where he was responsible for the organization's volunteer management and recruitment efforts and oversaw the growth of its network of tax sites from 30 to 53 across Northeast Florida.

RealSense Prosperity Campaign works to increase family financial stability in three ways: increasing income, increasing education, and increasing assets. Launched in 2003, this United Way-led initiative is a coalition of more than 60 organizations, including community and nonprofit agencies, business leaders, government, and other key stakeholders.

Annually from January to April, RealSense provides free tax preparation. Then, year-round, RealSense connects taxpayers with programs and services to improve financial stability.

“Many hard-working, tax-paying families are struggling to stretch their income. Claiming tax benefits and refunds is one important step toward increasing income and savings; but our goal is to connect taxpayers with year-round economic support and education,” explains Winkler. During the tax season and throughout the year, RealSense works to promote and expand access to: free financial education classes and savings programs, one-on-one credit counseling, and affordable banking products and services.

During the 2008 filing season, RealSense helped nearly 14,000 taxpayers file returns at their free tax sites, saving more than \$2.4 million in tax preparation fees. In addition, RealSense tax filers claimed more than \$4.5 million through the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and an astounding \$16.8 million in total refunds, up 427 percent from its pilot year results of \$3.2 million.

The Earned Income Tax Credit is a refundable tax credit available to working families and individuals. This tax credit can help low-income, working individuals and families pay off debt, build savings, and get ahead. However, the IRS estimates that 20 to 25 percent of Americans who qualify for the credit do not claim it, leaving millions in federal funds on the table. Often taxpayers are unaware of EITC or are concerned about the costs associated with seeking help filing for it.

Winkler said that, as the new RealSense Director, his goal will be to continue to build upon the foundation established during the past six years. He will also focus on growing the initiative's base of volunteers and increasing the number of low-wage tax filers who take advantage of EITC. “With support from our funders and partners, our staff and hundreds of volunteers, the RealSense Prosperity Campaign will continue to strive for a better quality of life for our community's most economically-challenged citizens,” said Winkler.

Winkler succeeds Kaye Schmitz, who was recently appointed Executive Director of the statewide Florida Prosperity Partnership. “Kaye successfully built United Way of Northeast Florida’s RealSense Prosperity Campaign into one of the leading asset building coalitions in the nation,” said Ms. Hodges. “We are thrilled to see her now applying those same skills throughout the State of Florida.”

“As Kaye moves on, Jeff’s proven determination and commitment toward helping hardworking individuals and families through RealSense will serve First Coast residents well,” stated Ms. Hodges.

RealSense Prosperity Campaign is a community-wide initiative led by United Way of Northeast Florida and funded by Bank of America, the City of Jacksonville, Family Foundations, the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, the National Disabilities Institute, Northeast Florida Community Action Agency, SunTrust Bank, United Way of Northeast Florida, United Way of St. Johns County, Wachovia Bank and Winn-Dixie. To learn more, visit RealSense at www.realsensejax.org or call United Way 2-1-1 or 1-904-632-0600. For information about the Florida Prosperity Partnership, contact Kaye Schmitz at 904-940-0296 or kayedschmitz@bellsouth.net.

United Way of Northeast Florida works to create real, long-lasting change in Northeast Florida by focusing on the building blocks for a good life. In partnership with volunteers, community organizations, and leaders, United Way is creating opportunities to improve life for people in Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau and northern St. Johns counties. In addition to RealSense, United Way leads United Way 2-1-1, a 24/7 information referral hotline; Life: Act 2, a pro-active response to an exploding senior population; and Full Service Schools, a community approach to removing barriers to academic success. For more information, call 904-390-3200 or visit www.liveunitednortheastflorida.org.