

RealSense Prosperity Campaign

United Way provides leadership, resources and focus to change lives in our community by creating sustainable improvements in education, income and health. United Way of Northeast Florida is a leader in ensuring:

- *Children enter kindergarten ready to succeed and students stay in school through graduation*
- *Individuals and families have the opportunity to achieve financial stability*
- *People have the opportunity to lead healthy and engaged lives*

In addition, United Way ensures that families in need have accurate, helpful information about social services through United Way 2-1-1.

WHAT: The RealSense Prosperity Campaign is an initiative of United Way of Northeast Florida, completing its seventh tax season. Our mission is to proactively provide resources to improve the prosperity of our community's most economically-challenged and vulnerable citizens, making our local economy and its citizens stronger. Free financial education classes, free tax preparation and enrollment in a matched savings program are the core areas of service offered through RealSense partners.

WHY: To strengthen Northeast Florida residents' financial stability. While our target population primarily is individuals and families living at, near or below the poverty line, RealSense provides services to **all** members of the community. Our free financial classes and tax sites are open to the public. Only the matched savings program has income eligibility criteria.

RESULTS:

- During the 2011 Tax Season, 15,443 clients in eight counties filed their Federal income taxes for free, resulting in \$21.7 million in total refund dollars returned to the our local economy at **no** cost to the clients. As a result, clients saved over \$3.4 million in preparation fees alone, while \$6.1 million in federal EITC funds were funneled into our local economy (a local economic impact of \$9 million in 2010).
- Free tax services save families money only once a year, while free financial education programs help save families money year-round. In 2010, more than 23,000 student hours were logged in all classes. This represents an increase of 57% from last year, clearly displaying the increased need and interest of our citizens to learn how to more effectively manage their wealth and assets. Surveys completed six months after participating in a financial education class indicate that 36% of participants decreased their debt, an improvement of 19%, and 36% indicated they had paid their bills on time, an improvement of 22%.

SUCCESS STORY:

Avery Evans, an apartment security guard and Northside resident, attended RealSense's Annual Tax Blitz Day on April 15. He had received an extra W-2 form and needed to file an amended tax return. When AARP Tax-Aide volunteer Barbara Rodon looked through his papers, she discovered he paid over \$1,000 to file for a tax refund anticipation loan (RAL) in December and had not been given a copy of his tax return.

RealSense was able to amend his return, and Avery ended up with an additional \$2400. After retiring from a 35-year IRS career, Rodon couldn't imagine doing anything else. "I do it because I want to give back to people in this community," she said. "That's what we're here for – to help keep the money in the hands of the taxpayers who need it so badly." As for Avery, he's hooked on RealSense stating, "The people at RealSense really care."