



**EarnIt!KeepIt!\$aveIt!**


Bay Area



# **OPENING A VITA SITE A HOW-TO TOOL KIT**



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## About this VITA Site Tool Kit

This Tool Kit is based on the successes and lessons learned by the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites working with United Way of the Bay Area's ***Earn It! Keep It! Save It!*** (EKS) Coalitions in the following San Francisco Bay Area counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo and Solano. It provides a brief overview of VITA site set-up and operations to assist organizations successfully open and operate their own VITA site.

United Way of the Bay Area's EKS Coalition is a partnership of over 200 public and private sector partners including government, private and public philanthropic agencies working to assist low and moderate income working families meet their basic needs and increase their financial stability and independence. In addition to providing free tax preparation services and helping families claim the Earned Income Tax Credit, the EKS coalition also helps working families claim other tax credits to help increase their income.

## Setting up a VITA Site

### Start up and Staffing

VITA sites generally open the last weekend in January or the first day of February and stay open until the April tax return deadline. However, the successful launch and operation of a VITA site requires planning over a much longer period. Participating agencies intending to serve as VITA sites should dedicate staff time for planning and service delivery from September through May.

Running a VITA site includes several phases of activity such as establishing a volunteer recruitment plan, EITC/VITA site promotion, managing day-to-day operations, ensuring data collection and reporting to the coalition or managing agency on a regular basis and at the end of the tax season.

Volunteer recruitment should begin in September and October. If possible, it's helpful to have an existing pool of volunteers from the host agency. They already have an established trusting relationship with prospective clients, will be familiar with the physical set-up at the site and with the site's computer capacity. Volunteers should be notified that Tax Law and tax software training is usually provided in January.

Other important considerations are the physical location and existing client base of the site. Sites located in a community with a large EITC eligible population and high client flow have a better chance of hosting a successful VITA site because they can reach a larger population. Most CBOs find that after the initial tax season, the number of clients served increases substantially due to returning clients and word-of-mouth marketing.

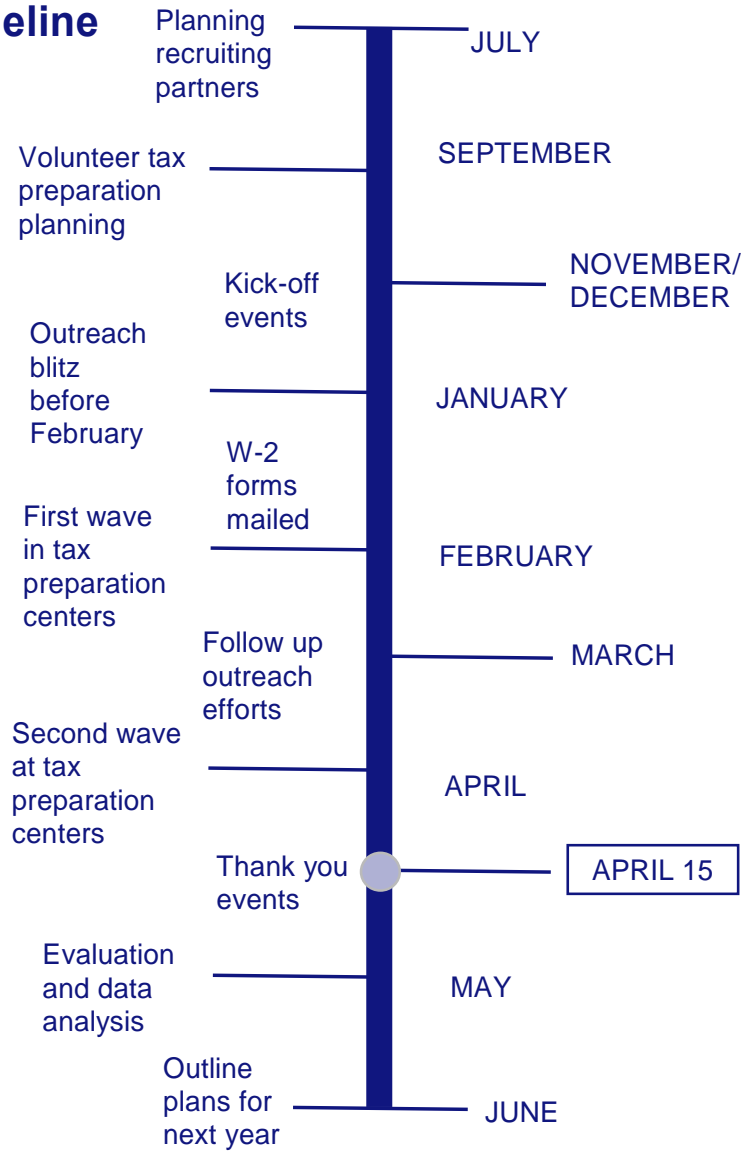
Because running a VITA site includes logistics management, volunteer recruitment, and ensuring a suitable location with computers, you may consider partnering with other agencies to help manage the workload.

## Monthly Checklist for New VITA Sites

The tax season is much shorter than the time commitment required to plan to host a VITA site. The list below includes key activities specific to the Coalition. Volunteer recruitment, fundraising and promoting EITC and its potential impact on economic-self sustainability are year-round activities that are best incorporated into the mission of your organization.

- **Summer- September's key activities include, determining logistics for VITA sites, such as location, staffing, and funding sources.**
- **October's key activities: identify site coordinator, hire staff (when applicable) and begin volunteer recruitment, asses computer capacity and begin marketing and direct client outreach, attend VITA coalition meetings.**
- **November's key activities include: coordinator will continue attending monthly coalition meeting, continue recruiting volunteers, order promotional material.**
- **December's key activities: securing IRS details (Electronic Filing Identification Number), tax software, and heavy VITA site promotion should begin.**
- **January's key activities: volunteer and coordinator training, assign volunteer positions and schedules, and continue marketing and outreach.**
- **February's key activities: schedule coalition- wide launch activity, all site staff should attend any coalition launches, site open.**
- **March's key activities: site coordinator's continue meeting, update UWBA with any changes in service days or hours.**
- **April's key activities: all end of season activities should be completed, such as data back-ups, reports, etc., and begin planning volunteer recognition event**
- **May's key activities: volunteer recognition event and final qualitative reports due.**

## Timeline



## VITA Operations & Roles

VITA sites vary in staffing and facility set-up. In general, when a client arrives at your site, they are met by a Greeter, and then the Screener takes them through an Intake Form to see if they qualify to receive free tax preparation services. All documents are completed with help from a site volunteer. This is also when necessary tax documents are reviewed and questions the client may have are answered. Information about other benefits such as food stamps and low cost health insurance is also given to clients. Other strategies to promote financial stability and independence such as opening bank accounts or schedules of available financial education classes are discussed while clients wait to have their tax returns prepared.

When a Tax Preparer (and Interpreter, if needed) become available the tax filer meets with that Tax Preparer at their computer work station to complete the tax return and the client survey together. When the tax return is complete, it will be printed so that the tax filer receives a copy. A volunteer Transmitter will electronically send the tax returns to the IRS from a central, secure computer. This is done at least once or twice a week over the course of the tax season.

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## Site Location and Computers

You will need a PC computer for each e-file tax preparation station using TaxWise software. Your computer operating system must be Windows 2000, NT, XP - or better - to use TaxWise. One computer must be linked to the internet so that completed returns can be electronically transmitted to the IRS.

### **Internet Explorer 6.0 or higher Recommended**

We highly recommend running version 6.0 or higher of Microsoft Internet Explorer. You may download it from the Microsoft site or install from the TaxWise CD.

#### **Computing checklist:**

- Check the computers you have available against the system requirements for TaxWise
- Consult your IT administrator regarding firewall or other access issues
- Keep all paperwork that comes with TaxWise
- Give yourself plenty of time to set up your computers before opening the site

## Description of VITA Site Volunteer Roles

**VITA Site Coordinator:** The VITA site coordinator provides coordination, organization, and supervision for all aspects of the VITA site operation. The site coordinator is also responsible for gathering, maintaining and compiling timely statistical reports as required.

**Training:** Tax Law and TaxWise classes or self-study and a passing score on the IRS Certification Exam are required for all VITA Site Coordinators.

**Tax Preparer:** Tax Preparers assist low income wage earners complete their tax returns during the tax filing season. Tax Preparers receive free training and are certified by the IRS. Tax Preparers work a minimum of 16 hours at the VITA site.

**Training:** Tax Law and TaxWise classes or self-study and a passing score on the IRS Certification Exam are required for all VITA Site Tax Preparers.

**Screeners:** Screeners are responsible for assisting clients to complete the Intake Form prior to having their tax returns prepared. This is a critical role as it is the initial point at which important filing information is gathered and verified.

**Training:** Tax Law and TaxWise classes or self-study and a passing score on the IRS Certification Exam are required for all VITA Site Screeners.

**Transmitters:** Transmitters send electronic tax returns to the IRS from VITA sites. Volunteers should be familiar with complex software, electronic data transmission and tax law. Experience with network administration is helpful but not required. Transmitters help trouble shoot returns that are rejected by the IRS. Returns can be rejected because of incorrect name spelling or incorrectly entered Social Security numbers. Transmitters work a minimum of 16 hours at the VITA site.

**Training:** Tax Law and TaxWise classes or self-study and a passing score on the IRS Certification Exam are required for all VITA Site Tax Transmitters

**Interpreter:** Interpreters aid VITA clients by working alongside the tax clients and Tax Preparers. Interpreters work a minimum of 16 hours in community-based organizations.

Volunteers who speak Bosnian, Cambodian, Cantonese, Farsi, Hindi, Laotian, Mandarin, Mien, Spanish and Vietnamese are always needed. No training required.

**Greeters:** Greeters welcome tax filers to the VITA site during the tax season. They are responsible for ensuring that tax filers have all the documents and information needed to complete their tax returns. Greeters work a minimum of 16 hours in community-based organizations. No training required.

### What is certification?

Certification ensures that you are qualified to assist others in preparing their tax returns. The IRS certifies volunteers by asking them to answer questions using reference materials and to fill out a sample tax return. It is an open book test done on your own time.

Once you are certified, the IRS guarantees your ability to prepare returns covered by the test you took so that, should there be any error in the return, you are not responsible for it. However, you cannot prepare returns that are beyond your training. For instance, VITA certification does not cover businesses and complex 1099 forms.

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## Data Collection and Reporting

In order to better serve our clients an Optional Survey is administered as part of the Intake Form. The data collected from the survey provides basic demographic and financial information about the clients to help us understand our target population's needs. Some data collected includes questions about ethnicity, whether the client has a bank account or health insurance, and whether they were return clients for tax services. Tax filers who would like to participate are asked to sign a data release waiver. Clients are not required to complete the survey in order to receive free tax preparation services, however capturing this data is essential to supporting our ability to identify our clients and provide services targeted to their needs. The information is also used to report the programmatic success to funders of the EKS Coalitions. The optional survey is added electronically to the Tax Wise software during the process of setting up defaults at your VITA site. Exact procedures for adding these Optional Survey questions to the software are provided to each site by the EKS Coalition.



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## Asset Development

The EKS Coalition's goal is to help low income individuals and families in the Bay Area meet their basic needs, build financial assets as they continue to become financially stable and achieve long-term financial independence. Each county EKS Coalition addresses these needs in a slightly different way, but all use the VITA/EITC program as the essential component to bring tax credits back to the people who need it most. The EITC credit provides one entry-point for clients to accumulate additional assets and then move from this first step into more comprehensive and robust asset accumulation and growth strategies for the future.

## Volunteer Management

**Recruitment:** Volunteers are recruited primarily by the sites with supplemental assistance from United Way's program staff. Each site has different volunteer recruitment strategies. It is important to establish an estimate of your volunteer needs as soon as you establish your scope of service.

**Scheduling:** Establish a schedule of volunteer work times based on your VITA sites' hours of operation. If your volunteer pool comes from your own staff, be sure to consider the regular service operating hours of your site so they don't conflict with your VITA operation.

**Support:** Host an orientation at your VITA site for all VITA volunteers prior to the opening of the VITA season to go over all aspects of the VITA season and answer questions about the work they are doing. This orientation will also provide you an opportunity to explain the mission of your organization, information about the use of the facility, and what your goals are for the VITA season. Ensure that the coordinator or another person who is knowledgeable about the facility and the VITA program will be available to assist and support volunteers throughout the VITA season.

**Training:** All VITA Site Coordinators, Tax Preparers, Transmitters, and Screeners need to be certified by the IRS by successfully passing an open book, take home exam and submitting it to the IRS. All study material/manuals are provided by the IRS and are the same whether the volunteer attends tax law classes or elects to do the self study course. Manuals are generally printed at the end of the year to accommodate any changes to the tax code and are available in January.

**Recognition:** At the end of the VITA season volunteers and new partners should be thanked and recognized for their contributions during the VITA season. Giving volunteer certificates and partner plaques is a good way to acknowledge these contributions. Coalitions can develop a regional recognition strategy or you may want to have celebrations just for the volunteers from your VITA site to celebrate your successes.



## EITC Promotion

The EKS Coalition works to increase the number of low and moderate income working families who claim EITC by getting the word out that these tax credits exist and can lead to substantial refunds. Outreach is an essential part of the campaign, especially to those who qualify but do not file taxes because their income is too low, or don't know these valuable tax credits are available.

Another reason to promote your site is that many who qualify for EITC pay to have their taxes done and often buy a Refund Anticipation Loan (RAL) from the paid preparer at exorbitant interest rates. RALs are expensive and dangerous because payment of IRS refunds is conditional on the refund being in excess of any outstanding claims against the taxpayer. So it's important to address these issues by making promotion of EITC and the free VITA sites a priority. A useful strategy is to develop partnerships with local financial institutions who can promote your VITA site's program and help clients set up direct deposit of refunds for faster payment in order to deter clients' interest in RALs.

Each county produces flyers to advertise the campaign and local VITA sites. Taxpayers are encouraged to call a central toll free (1-800) information and referral number for detailed information on the sites such as service days and hours, site address, as well as the types of tax forms which are prepared there. Distribution of promotional materials in targeted languages requires the coordination of individuals from many agencies including the VITA sites, local municipal and county governmental, social service agencies, CBOs, schools, community colleges, libraries, and other community organizations.

United Way of the Bay Area hosts a website ([EarnitKeepitSaveit.org](http://EarnitKeepitSaveit.org)) with information for taxpayers, volunteers and VITA sites. United Way of the Bay Area, in collaboration with local electronic media, distributes Public Service Announcements (PSA) videos to local cable and news stations. Press releases and media alerts are distributed prior to and during the tax season. Post season press releases reporting on the campaign successes are published shortly after the tax season closes. Coalition VITA sites also place advertisements and editorials in their neighborhood newsletters and newspapers to spread the word. The grass roots promotion by the VITA sites is essential to the success of the project.

**Early publicity and promotion is vital because your constituency may go to a paid tax preparer before your site opens.** Most sites also experience a lull in activity in March so we suggest that you plan additional outreach for your site at that time.



## Funding

Through membership in the Regional EKS coalition volunteers receive free training in tax law and the use of tax prep software, recruitment materials and software for electronic filing. Some VITA sites in our EKS Coalition have received limited financial support through United Way of the Bay Area and other partners. However, we do not expect that these grants fully cover the costs of running the VITA sites.

If you can use your organization's facility as the venue for tax preparation, this will save overhead costs. The role of the VITA Site Coordinator is demanding and may involve full time hours. If the site can not provide a coordinator, it may be necessary to ensure adequate funds are available to pay a VITA Site Coordinator during both site preparation and the tax season ...roughly 6 months. The aim of the Coalition is to embed the VITA program into communities so that it is sustainable. Therefore, we strongly recommend that potential VITA sites bare in mind both short and long-term funding and staffing needs when considering hosting and operating a VITA site.

### **Items to consider:**

- *Identify suitable site location and check computing access*
- *Identify a site coordinator in early Fall*
- *Ensure you have adequate funding for the tax season*
- *Establish a phone line or message line if no receptionist is available to answer client calls*

Potential Areas of EXPENSES
Staff Time (in kind)
Staff Time (paid)
Facilities (e.g. rent, utilities, security)
Supplies (photocopies, printer, paper)
Postage
Volunteers (refreshments, snacks, orientation, etc.)
Child Care for VITA clients
Phone Costs (dedicated lines, line with voicemail)
Other (computer equipment, extending operating hours)

## ABOUT

### EarnIt!KeepIt!\$aveIt!

Did you know that in the Bay Area, over 75 million dollars in Earned Income Tax Credits go unclaimed each year? United Way created the Earn It! Keep It! Save It! Bay Area program to provide free tax preparation assistance to help local, hard-working families claim those credits and build financial stability.

We also connect tax filers and others like you to financial education resources and opportunities to make the most of your tax refund.



For more information visit: [www.earnitkeepitsaveit.org](http://www.earnitkeepitsaveit.org) or call  
510.238.2418

