

Share Our Strength Community of Practice Grant Case Study: Texas

Improving Access to Tax Credits for Families

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The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) temporarily expanded the child tax credit (CTC) for most families with children. The CTC was already a key policy that reduces poverty among children and their families along with the earned income tax credit (EITC; Fox and Burns 2021); the CTC expansion increased the maximum credit for many and extended benefits to very low-income families who had previously been ineligible for the CTC or received only limited benefits (Tax Policy Center 2021). ARPA also mandated that up to half of a family's expected CTC be delivered as advanced payments. Families received monthly payments from July through December 2021. Shortly after payments began, food hardship dropped (Perez-Lopez 2021).

Barriers to Receiving CTC

To be eligible for the CTC, adults must have a child under age 17 that has a Social Security Number (SSN). The claiming adult is required to have either an SSN or an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN). An ITIN helps those considered ineligible for SSNs comply with federal tax reporting and are generally used by noncitizens. For many families, monthly payments of the CTC began shortly after the ARPA passed, with the IRS using family and bank information provided on tax returns filed in 2019 or 2020. However, families with very low incomes, who often had not previously filed a tax return, were more likely to need to actively apply for the CTC and thus were at risk of missing out on the monthly payments. Families with very low incomes are often not required to file a tax return as they are below the filing threshold and are not eligible for tax credits with income requirements. In limited cases, the IRS may have been able to send advanced monthly payments based on information individuals provided to claim an economic impact payment (i.e., stimulus check) in calendar year 2020. But often these families would need to apply to receive the CTC. Even when a tax return had been filed, it could contain outdated information on who is supporting a child, which could result in money being sent to the wrong person. For example, if a child's parents are not married, the filer claiming the child could change from year to year (including grandparents and other guardians). Previously filed tax returns also would not include children born after those tax returns were filed. Those most likely to miss out on the automatic advanced payment were Hispanic/Latinx families, non-Hispanic/Latinx adults who are American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or more than one race; adults with very low incomes, Spanish-speaking households, and families with mixed immigration statuses (Fischer et al. 2022; Karpman et al. 2021).

Description of Initiative

To improve awareness and take-up of the newly expanded CTC, Share Our Strength, a national organization working to end childhood hunger and poverty in the United States, provided grants to organizations and Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites in 13 states to improve outreach, tax assistance, and policy advocacy following the regular tax season (the regular tax season to file 2021 taxes opened January 24, 2022, and ended April 18, 2022). These organizations came together as a community of practice, learning together and sharing information in pursuit of their common goals. To facilitate learning from the experiences of the community of practice, the Urban Institute conducted an assessment of their successes, challenges, strategies, and results. These insights can inform ongoing outreach efforts for the expanded CTC, as well as outreach efforts for other tax benefits directed toward low- and middle-income families like the EITC. The most recent IRS and Census estimates of EITC participation suggest that 22 percent of eligible taxpayers failed to claim the EITC in 2018 (IRS 2022).

The Community of Practice

Share Our Strength worked throughout the grant period to intentionally build a community of organizations engaging in similar work. Share Our Strength regularly checked in with grantees and conducted bimonthly peer learning calls that involved experts sharing information on relevant topics including outreach and media and how to collect stories from clients, among others. Share Our Strength offered grantees access to SimplifyCT, a nationwide virtual VITA service that provides one-on-one support for grantees with questions about the CTC application process via a tax advice hotline. Another key partner of Share Our Strength is Code for America, a nonprofit organization that seeks to reduce the gap between the public and private sectors in their use of technology and design. The organization provided technical assistance on outreach and the use of GetCTC Simplified Filing Portal. Share Our Strength partnered with the National Disability Institute (NDI) to increase awareness of the CTC and other tax credits within the disability community. NDI provided office hours and webinars to grantee and subgrantee staff throughout the grant period on best practices to reach taxpayers with disabilities. Share Our Strength engaged a policy expert to consult with grantees advancing state-level tax policies. Finally, grantees could communicate with each other through the community of practice's Slack channel to share updates, questions, and lessons learned.

The Case Studies

The Urban Institute's assessment of the community of practice initiative includes a case study of grantees in 10 states, as well as two briefs on nationally focused work being led by the NDI and work with Native communities in three additional states (Montana, South Dakota, and Minnesota) supported by the Oweesta Corporation. Case study reports summarize and document grantees' activities, strategies, successes and challenges, best practices, and any actions taken toward improving equitable receipt of the CTC. The Community of Practice focused on four areas of work:

- Outreach intended to improve knowledge about tax benefits
- Tax assistance for families that had not yet received the CTC or other state or federal tax credits
- Collection of narratives that could help policymakers and advocates understand the importance of tax benefits
- Policy work intended to improve tax benefits in the future

This case study describes our approach and provides an overview of the grantees in Texas and their grant-funded activities, including their policy, outreach, and tax assistance work, and closes with information on their lessons learned and future goals. The material in the case study is based on the interviews that we conducted with grantees, subgrantees, and partners. Subgrantees are defined as organizations that received direct funding from the grantee, whereas partners are groups that grantees collaborated with without exchanging money.

Case Study: Texas

Texas State-Level Tax Environment

People in all states have access to the federal tax credits, but in some states, additional state tax credits benefiting similar populations exist. However, Texas does not have a state income tax, and does not have any state level tax credits.

Nationally, an estimated 79.3 percent of eligible taxpayers claimed the federal EITC in 2019, and in Texas, 79.6 percent of eligible taxpayers claimed the federal EITC (IRS 2022). Families eligible for larger benefits are more likely to receive the EITC and the majority of people eligible for the EITC that do not receive the EITC do not file a tax return (Holt and Duratinsky 2021; Goldin 2018). CTC participation is less well understood. In general, participation is likely higher than that of the EITC. The vast majority of families eligible for the CTC file tax returns each year. In 2021, the participation rate likely dropped slightly since families not required to file a return were made eligible for the full benefit.

Demographic Data on Families with Children

The national median annual household income for households with children under 18 in 2021 was \$84,197 and was \$76,576 in Texas.¹ The average national child poverty rate in 2021 was 16.9 percent, compared with 19.5 percent in Texas.²

In Texas, approximately four in 10 people identify as white, non-Hispanic (40.7 percent), a similar percentage (39.8 percent) identify as Hispanic/Latinx, 11.8 percent identify as Black, non-Hispanic, 5.0 percent identify as Asian, non-Hispanic and, 2.9 percent identify as American Indian, Native Hawaiian

¹ “Median Family Income in the Past 12 Months (In 2021 Inflation-adjusted Dollars) by Presence of Own Children Under 18 Years,” Table B19125, ACS 2021 1-year, Census Reporter, 2021, https://censusreporter.org/data/table/?table=B19125&geo_ids=040|01000US&primary_geo_id=01000US.

² “Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE): Under Age 18 in Poverty,” United States Census Bureau, 2021, https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/saipe/#/?s_measures=u18.

and Pacific Islander, or some other race or two or more races.,³ Texas also has a food insecurity rate of 13.7 percent, compared with 10.4 percent nationally.⁴ Texas’s Senate and House both hold a significant Republican majority.

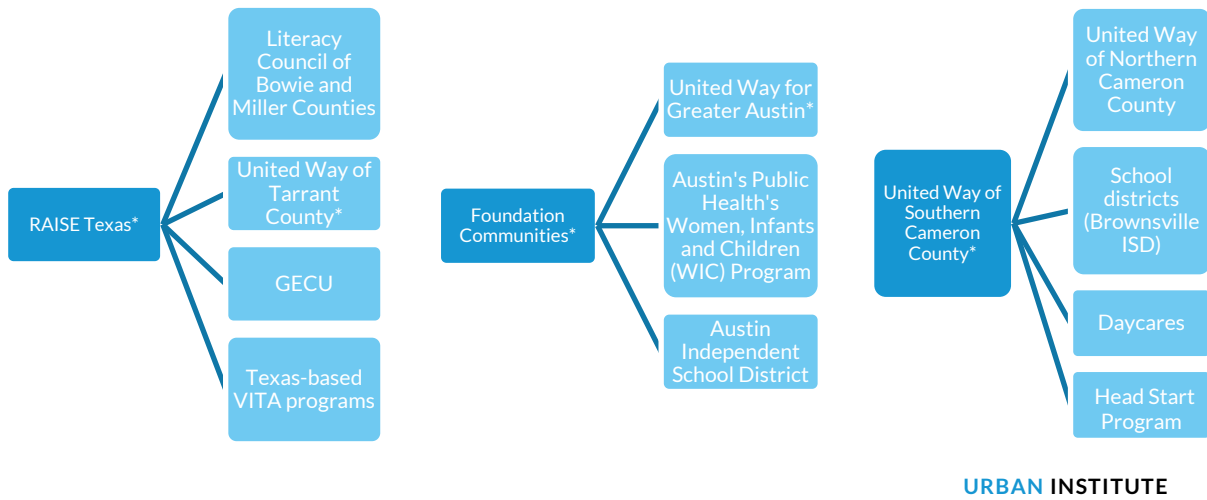
Grant Structure in Texas

In Texas, the main grant recipients were RAISE Texas, Foundation Communities, and United Way of Southern Cameron County. They each worked with several partners across Texas. We conducted interviews with RAISE Texas, Foundation Communities, United Way of Southern Cameron County (UWSCC), as well as the United Way of Tarrant County (a partner of RAISE Texas) and the United Way for Greater Austin (a Foundation Communities partner) in the summer and fall of 2022.

³ See table DP05 from the 2021 5-year ACS estimates in “Census Data,” United States Census Bureau <https://data.census.gov>.

⁴ Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2021,” September 2022, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=104655>.

FIGURE 1
Grantee, Subgrantee, and Partner Network in Texas



Source: Share Our Strength Community of Practice.

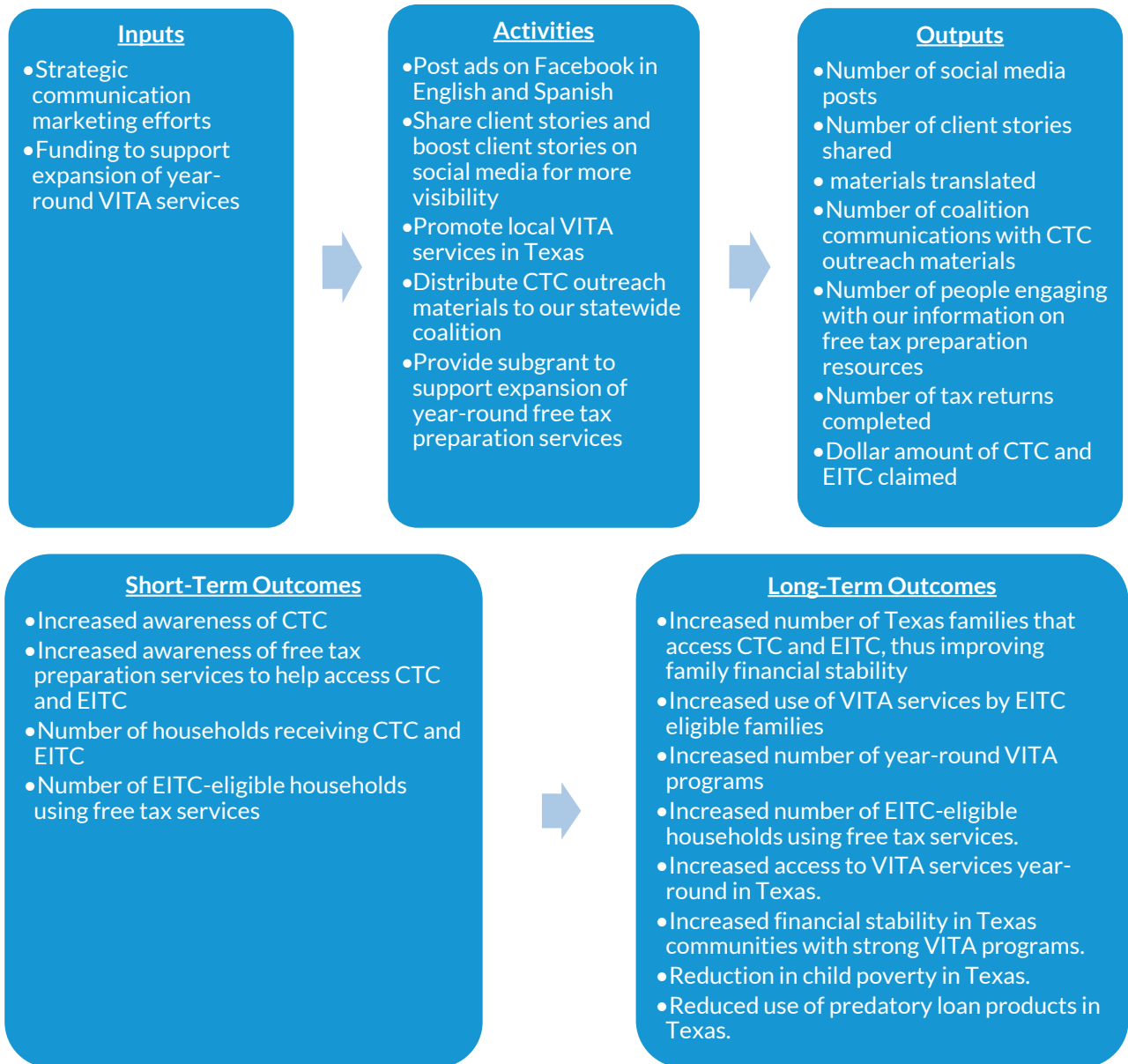
Notes: We interviewed those with an * next to the name. Grantees and subgrantees are in dark blue. Partners are highlighted in light blue.

TABLE 1
Description of Interviewed Grantees in Texas

Grantee/Subgrantee	Description of Organization	Grant Activities	Target Population
RAISE Texas	Statewide organization of nonprofits focused on supporting low- and moderate-income Texans.	Main grant goal is to create new VITA sites and improve financial stability in general.	Low- and middle-income Texans and Spanish-speakers
Foundation Communities	Organization that focuses on affordable housing in Austin and other north Texas sites, but also offers support services like tax preparation.	They manage VITA sites and focus on helping file ITIN applications. Six of their sites are open during tax season and two are open year-round. Collaborate often with RAISE.	Black and Latinx families in East Austin. With SOS funding, they focused on expanding to Asian communities.
United Way of Southern Cameron County	Regionally focused VITA site that helps provide many different support services, including tax preparation and filing ITINs.	They are a VITA site and focus on helping file ITIN applications.	Immigrant communities and Spanish-speakers.

Source: Organization websites and interviews with grantees.

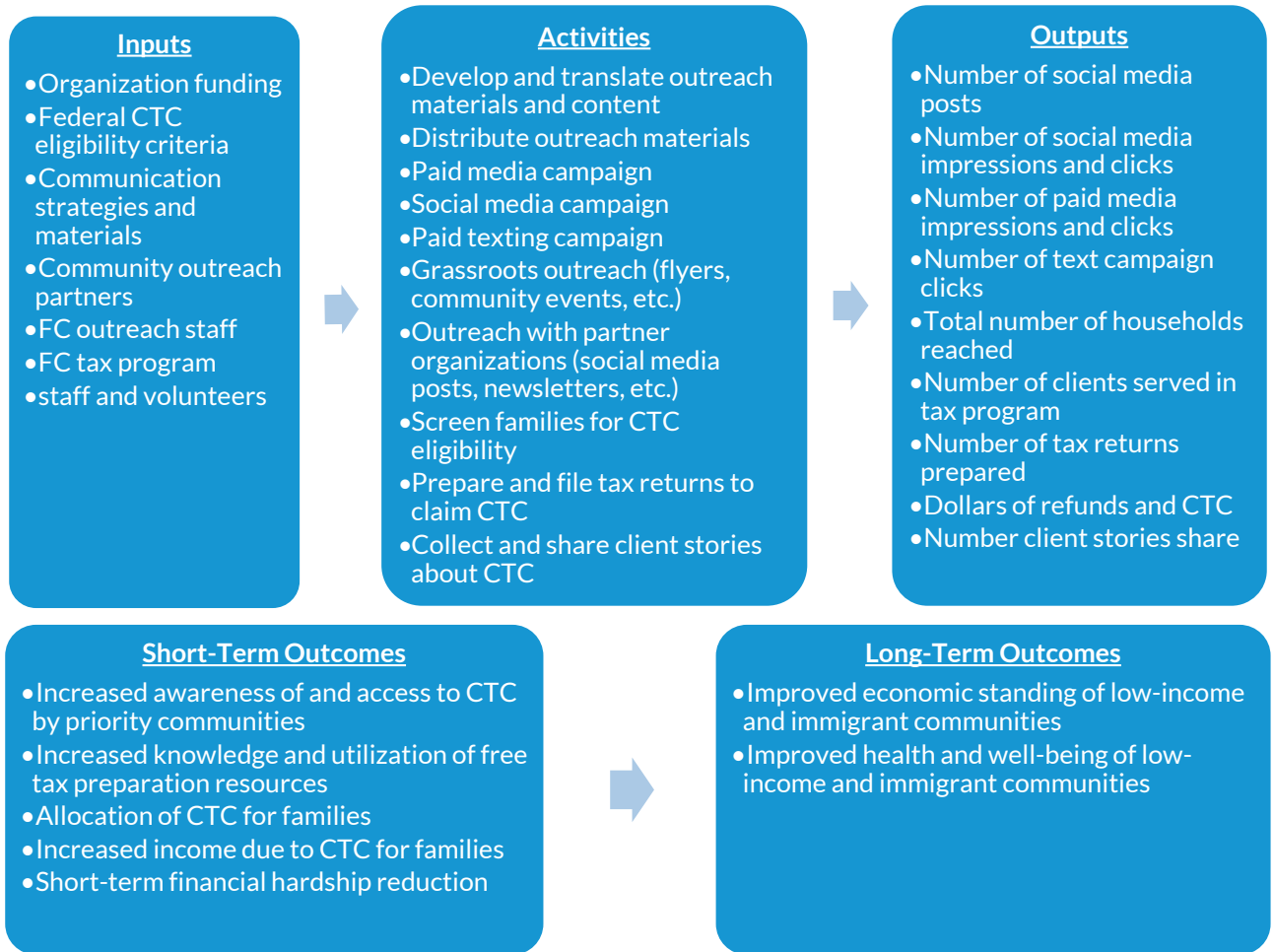
FIGURE 2
Logic Model for RAISE Texas



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FIGURE 3

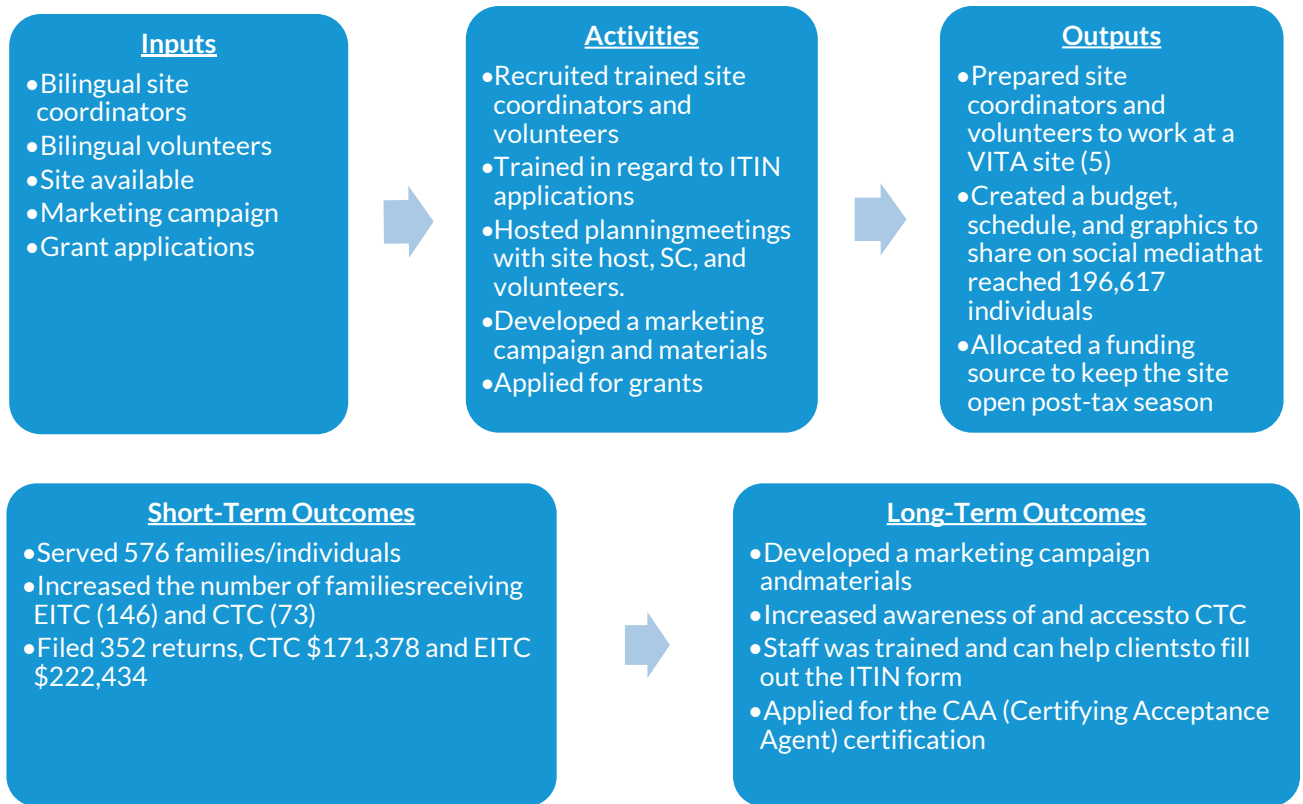
Logic Model for Foundation Communities



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FIGURE 4

Logic Model for United Way of Southern Cameron County



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Outreach Work

Grantees identified a minimum of two communities in their state to deliver post-tax season outreach to encourage enrollment in the CTC, EITC, and other relevant benefits. Grantees were allowed to develop and employ a wide range of strategies. Some grantees utilized GetCTC’s unique URL system, an outreach tracking weblink that allowed GetCTC staff to track how many people were reached that started a tax return—a helpful metric in gauging effectiveness of outreach strategies. GetCTC is a national online platform developed by Code for America (CFA) that allows families with children with incomes below \$25,000 to claim a CTC without filing a full tax return. Upon request, CFA created a unique URL for organizations working on reaching out to these communities to use to better track how people found GetCTC.

Texas’s outreach strategy centered around building general awareness of the child tax credit and the opportunity to file taxes and claim credits after the April tax deadline through a multitude of partners and stakeholders.

RAISE Texas

- Focused on social media advertising on Facebook and promoted VITA programs offering year-round services through boosted posts on Facebook
- Provided graphics and flyers in English and Spanish
- Asked partners to post graphic template on their social media sites which boosted number of clients that came to VITA sites
- Aided in outreach efforts of other organizations and increasing capacity of local VITA sites; they gave a subgrant to United Way of Tarrant County, so they could do more volunteer training.
- Provided subgrant to GECU in El Paso (a state chartered credit union that provides tax preparation services) to support increasing the advertising for their year-round VITA services
- Asked RAISE coalition members to promote GetCTC and local VITA programs to their networks and clients to help more Texans claim EITC and CTC

Foundation Communities

- Tailored advertising depending on what they learned worked for different communities. For example, they learned from their local Telemundo station that Latinx communities are particularly responsive to radio and TV ads
- Made efforts to conduct more outreach with Black families and recruited partners from that community
- Translated the outreach materials to multiple languages partners identified as necessary (e.g., English, Spanish, Farsi, Arabic, Vietnamese)
- Continued to use mass texting to spread their messages
- Used terminology people could understand—“Saying ‘mixed-status households’ to families with at least one noncitizen member doesn’t mean much to people, but if we use the word ITIN, people know.” Tailored their messaging for grandparents who might be heads of households and may face additional barriers to accessing services
- Tried to focus education on helping mixed-status families understand their eligibility for credits
- Changed their strategy to represent diverse racial groups in their advertisements and social media posts to be more intentional about helping people see themselves in their materials
- Held parent engagement sessions with schools and partnered with Austin Public Library to aid in outreach

United Way of Southern Cameron County

- Provided flyers in English and Spanish
- Continued their summer campaign at schools to recruit families

- Used an intake survey every client fills out before their appointment and found that 57 percent of clients hear about them through word of mouth; this number is most likely higher because they do not track how people who call in hear about them

United Way of Tarrant County

- Translated all outreach materials to Spanish; they also used language lines when working with clients
- Partnered with Texas Christian University (TCU) and worked with the Spanish department's students to recruit translators for VITA sites
- Partnered with several colleges (TCU Spanish Department for translation, Texas A&M law school in Fort Worth to help give presentations to families, Texas Western University has a VITA class to help students volunteer on tax sites)

United Way for Greater Austin

- Prioritized marketing on Spanish language TV channels and social media marketing
- Found that word of mouth referrals for tax programs are the best outreach and found the most success by asking community-based organizations to spread the word
- Worked with UT's Social Work School to interview families and referral providers about which outreach tactics work best

Successes

- **Language accessibility:** The flyers were made available in English and Spanish for all organizations, and the grantees made a concerted effort to use language that their target population would identify with.
- **Diverse partnerships:** UWGA developed several university-based partnerships to expand their volunteer base and solicit feedback on their outreach strategies. Foundation Communities also partnered with diverse media outlets, such as Telemundo, to reach the Latinx community.
- **Intake forms:** UWSCC has clients fill in an intake form before their appointment in which they ask how they heard about their services. This enables them to tailor their outreach methods and get feedback when they try new things.
- **Offering diverse tax assistance methods:** UWGA offered multiple methods of tax assistance including virtual and in person. They also provided office hours or webinars to engage the community.

Challenges

- **Social media challenges:** RAISE described how many people viewed Facebook posts as scams, so it was hard for these materials to be taken seriously. It was difficult for them to address these questions over social media.

- **Distrust of “free” services:** RAISE described how many people did not trust that their “free” tax preparation services; they did not think they were actually free but also took pride in paying for a service, seeing that as higher quality. They use different language to try to build trust: “We try to find language that shows them that VITA sites are good, so phrases like ‘no cost to you,’ ‘funded by....’ In Texas there is no regulation of paid preparers, so we’re trying to get people to understand that VITA volunteers are verified.”
- **ITIN application complications:** Before UWSCC applied to be a Certified Accepting Agent, they spoke with the Mexican Consulate to promote their services and ITIN applications. However, the consulate did not want to promote ITINs because then the client would need to send their documentation (Mexican passport) to the Austin office, which was overwhelmed with appointments at the time. They did not want folks to be without their passport for a long period of time waiting for the appointment because it is their only form of ID. They have not yet completed the Certified Acceptance Agent certification.
- **Virtual services:** All their services went virtual during pandemic, so they struggled to get people to come back in person. Volunteers prefer to be in person for several reasons. For one, volunteers tend to be older and not be as comfortable with technology. Volunteers also enjoy the in-person interaction with clients and enjoy observing the direct impact of their work, which was missing from virtual tax preparation.
- **Outreach outside of tax season:** Foundation Communities described facing challenges getting organizations to focus on tax outreach outside of tax season, particularly over the summer and at the start of the school year when organizations experienced limited staff capacity and shifted priorities to meet family start of school needs.
- **Reaching target populations:** Foundation Communities diversified their client base by bringing on community-based organizations that serve Asian communities, but the process of developing partnerships was slow.

Tax Assistance Work

Grantees in the cohort can either be statewide nonprofit organizations that engage in advocacy, policy, and outreach work, or they can be VITA sites. VITA sites offer free tax preparation help to low-income individuals, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and non-English speakers that otherwise face barriers preparing tax returns, including claiming valuable tax credits. Nationally, about 60 percent of tax returns are prepared with the help of a tax preparer, though it is not a requirement that one be used. Although VITA sites are used to prepare a relatively small amount of all returns (less than 2 percent of tax returns with incomes less than \$30,000 are filed each year with VITA sites), they provide a critical resource that allows people to avoid costs associated with using a paid tax preparer and receive the full value of their tax credits.⁵

⁵ “Why Do Low-Income Families Use Tax Preparers?” Tax Policy Center’s Briefing Book, Tax Policy Center, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/why-do-low-income-families-use-tax-preparers>.

In Texas, one grantee, Foundation Communities, managed VITA sites at their properties and community locations, and one grantee, UWSCC, is a VITA site. RAISE Texas provided technical assistance and support to VITA sites across the state while their subgrantees managed VITA sites. VITA grantees were expected to offer post-tax season CTC outreach.

Some specific challenges included helping immigrant populations file, as only those with ITINs can receive the credit. UWSCC tried to get CAA certification, which would have allowed them to help individuals who do not qualify for a Social Security number obtain an ITIN, but they have not yet because the Mexican consulate said that they were too overwhelmed with documentation requests. Foundation Communities does help submit ITIN applications and renewals.

During the grant period, grantees in Texas did the following:⁶

- Filed **roughly 1,000** tax returns
- Helped individuals claim **roughly \$940,000** in CTCs and EITCs

Collecting Participant Data

Share Our Strength believes that client narratives can be a powerful advocacy tool, helping policy makers understand the impact of tax credits for low-income families. Foundation Communities held a parent engagement input session last year and recruited 600 families, so they plan to pull information from this group. Foundation Communities collected four client stories highlighting the impact claiming federal tax credits had on their household, particularly the Child Tax Credit and the Earned Income Tax credit. Foundation Communities shared the collected client stories with Share Our Strength and RAISE Texas to aid their advocacy and outreach efforts. RAISE asks for three to four success stories from each partner. UWSCC spoke with some families and found that most used their refund (especially CTC) for paying bills.

Policy Agenda

Share Our Strength also encouraged their grantees to partner with key stakeholders to identify and implement strategies to advance legislative or administrative priorities aimed at increasing access to tax credits. Most states include advocating for a state-level refundable CTC or EITC if the state does not already have one in their policy priorities. Other priorities include administrative changes such as creating simplified filing portals, advocating for tax forms in different languages, and data sharing between the IRS and state agencies. In regard to the simplified filing portals, at the time of the advanced CTC payments, the IRS faced a tremendous backlog of paper forms (GAO 2022). Families were encouraged to claim the CTC electronically to avoid new paperwork getting caught up in existing

⁶ These numbers are approximate and are pulled from ongoing reporting completed during the grant period. These may be inaccurate due to fluctuations and inaccuracies in the reporting process.

delays.⁷ Given the diversity of political environments across the cohort, this work may have taken many forms. Unlike short-term outreach efforts to increase access to tax credits, policy work is typically a long-term endeavor.

In Texas, RAISE Texas has taken on the biggest role. They are focusing their policy efforts at the local level, specifically seeking to increase local support for federal tax credit outreach and free tax preparation. Texas does not have a state income tax, which makes it more difficult to advocate for state-only credits. Because of this, RAISE Texas has largely been focused on federal credits. Right now, they are planning a convening for June 2023 of local VITA providers and will unveil a toolkit at the meeting that will include the following:

- Template language for city/county resolutions supporting tax credit outreach and free tax preparation
- Sample asks for annual budget appropriations funding local outreach efforts and year-round VITA sites
- Collaborating with Every Texan to include local data on federal EITC and CTC participation

Raise Texas is also working with Congressman Lloyd Doggett to obtain information on the amount of IRS VITA funding that Texas receives compared to other states. Depending on what the data shows after the IRS agrees to share it, they may also work with elected officials representing Texas to advocate for the state to receive more VITA funding. Without a state income tax, there is not a ready implementation tool for a CTC, so a state child tax credit is not a feasible policy solution without a statewide structure.

Lessons Learned and Future Goals

The expanded CTC in 2021 included substantial benefits for people who had previously received no or limited benefits from the CTC. To deliver those benefits, advocates in many states worked together to reach the communities least likely to receive the credit including Hispanic/Latinx, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and low-income families. The temporary nature of the credit also offered an opportunity for organizations to advocate for the credit's continuation at the federal level, or supportive state policies.

Share Our Strength facilitated groups in states working together toward improved outreach, policy and advocacy, and access to tax assistance. This community of practice met regularly, shared strategies, and generally coordinated efforts in the hopes of having a larger impact than they would have if they had not collaborated.

⁷ "2022 Tax Filing Season Begins Jan. 24; IRS Outlines Refund Timing and What to Expect in Advance of April 18 Tax Deadline," IRS, January 10, 2022, <https://Content.Govdelivery.Com/Accounts/USIRS/Bulletins/304f388?Reqfrom=Share/>.

Lessons Learned

- UWSCC explained several reasons to keep sites open past April 15. Many people need help with amendments or if they had been working out of state, they usually must come back to Texas and file after the deadline. Because the deadline was extended the last two years, many people are still confused about filing deadlines.
- RAISE also pointed out that having the VITA sites open year-round creates trust between the site and the community—they know that they will be there if something happens with their refund or filing. RAISE explained, “The most successful VITA sites have the same location, have been there for years and same staff so people feel like if they go back there, they’ll be there for me.”
- UWSCC pointed out that the IRS grant for VITA sites does not measure ITIN applications as a deliverable, so it is not an incentive for VITA programs to do this. It then becomes up to the individual VITA site coordinators. Many might be willing to do this, but they just do not have the funds for it. Building capacity to support ITIN applications, which facilitate tax filing for those who do not have a Social Security number, is a useful priority before the traditional tax season begins, because once the tax season starts, sites do not have time.
- RAISE thinks it is valuable to embrace virtual services and sees this as an opportunity to expand VITA.
- UWTC explained that they tried to recognize their volunteers and show appreciation so that they are more likely to return.
- Foundation Communities recommends prioritization of community engagement strategies, including investing time upfront in meeting with key community-based organizations to establish partnerships and support, gathering input from trusted community entities on the best methods of communication to reach priority demographic groups, obtaining input from priority community members through various means, such as surveys, input sessions, and one-on-one meetings, and compensating community members (staff and clients) who participate in advisory group sessions that inform outreach activities and for clients who share their stories.

Future Goals

- RAISE hopes to start reaching out to financial coaches to elevate their messages since these can be trusted sources of information for many people.
- Foundation Communities hopes to work more closely with the NDI. They went to the office hours that NDI provided to the community of practice, and NDI offered to review their outreach materials.
- UWGA is looking to partner with employers, so they can use their locations as tax preparation sites.
- RAISE Texas hopes to create a toolkit on how to obtain local city and county funding in Texas for post-tax season services. The toolkit will include examples of how to share county or zip-

code level data on the impact of additional EITC and CTC dollars along with personal client stories to build a compelling case for funding that can be presented to local city or county elected officials. RAISE Texas plans to share the toolkit with VITA programs by early June.

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