National Organization of Black County Officials, Inc. (NOBCO)

Report On The

Delta Initiative Earned Income Tax Credit Project

Submitted To:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Presented by:

Webster J. Guillory, Chairman
NOBCO Board of Directors

July 24, 2003 (MOD-01)

About the National Organization of Black County Officials, Inc. (NOBCO)

The National Organization of Black County Officials, Inc., is a non-profit [501(c)(3)] educational organization.

NOBCO was founded in 1984 to provide general program development management and educational support for over 3,000 Black elected and appointed county officials.

Special projects and program services to communities across the United States have included: AIDS Education and Outreach to communities (Partnership: Center for Disease Control), Asthma and Indoor Air (Partnership: Environmental Protection Agency), Harold Hayden Scholarship Fund (Partnership: NABCO Business Round Table), Economic Development Services and Programs in the USA, Youth and Adults support programs (Partnership: U.S. Department of Agriculture Forestry), and Earned Income Tax Credit Program – Delta Initiative (Partnership: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Other initiatives have been in partnership with the National Association of Counties (NACo).

For more information about NOBCO refer to the website: www.nobcoiaq.org.

About The NOBCO
Delta Initiative Earned Income Tax Credit

The Delta Initiative Earned Income Tax Credit Project (EITC) is a collaborative project between the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Administration on Children and Families (ACF), Internal Revenue Service (IRS), DHHS Office of Community Services (OCS), and the National Organization of Black County Officials (NOBCO).

GOAL

Increase the number of Temporary Assistance To Needy Families (TANF) recipients and low-income workers who claim the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) in at least two targeted counties in seven Delta States for tax year 2002.

NOBCO, as the lead agency in the project, focused on fourteen (14) counties and cities in the Delta region. The project was to inform working people who earn low or moderate incomes and file a federal income tax return that they may be eligible to receive some or all of their federal income tax that was taken out of their pay during the year. Upon reviewing those states that may have the most to gain by filing federal income tax forms, NOBCO targeted seven states for this initial project. The states were: Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee.

The participating states and counties and estimated loss of EITC income follow:

STATES	COUNTIES	ESTIMATED LOSS OF EITC INCOME (2000)
Alabama	Jefferson/Montgomery	$42,000,000
Arkansas	Pulaski/Clark	$15,000,000
Kentucky	Fayette/Jefferson	$25,000,000
Louisiana	Orleans/East Baton Rouge	$55,000,000
Mississippi	Hinds/Forrest	$19,000,000
Missouri	St. Louis/Jackson	$40,000,000
Tennessee	Shelby/Davidson	$65,000,000

Statement of Work
NOBCO Project Strategy

NOBCO, in working with the fourteen targeted counties in seven states, developed a community outreach information sharing and program education strategy.

Although this was a seven-month funded project that began in January 2003, N0BCO had high expectations to complete its goals in less than traditional ways to reach people of the

target population. The strategy was to identify two counties in each state to advance the project goals. Primary goals included engaging public officials and community leaders in new innovative ways; expanding public awareness and understanding of EITC using quantitative and qualitative methods in layperson's terms to create public interest; assist in organizing local community partnerships using developmental technical assistance strategies, and increasing the number of eligible persons applying for EITC benefits by using grassroots and grasstops communication strategies.

To enable the multi-strategy approach to be successful several agencies were involved in this effort. In order to facilitate discussion among all involved in the project and to ensure that both professionals and nonprofessionals would be active and committed participants in the first meeting and to make the project as meaningful as possible, the use of outside consultants and speakers were used at the meeting. This proved to be a successful strategy because suggestions from all parties allowed each state to develop an agenda tailored to disseminate EITC strategies to their successful communities.

As a tertiary outcome some of the facilitators, who were from Michigan, were able to use strategies at the initial project meeting to begin developing a six-county EITC project in their state with the purpose of targeting low to moderate-income groups in these counties. In addition, faculty at Michigan State University (MSU) are now involved with EITC efforts and, thanks to their willingness to disseminate information through their extension network, more citizens than ever in the state will be apprised of this project.

In essence, the pilot project by NOBCO and other units involved has already begun its work beyond the Delta Project by spreading to Michigan. Expanding EITC to other states was a long-range goal of NOBCO, and it has already begun to address the goal to expand the project to other regions.

Methods

The initial meeting held with participants from DHHS, ACS, IRS, OCS and NOBCO, also included representatives from the seven states that were comprised of the Delta Initiative. This meeting was held January 2003 at the E-Center on the campus of Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi. The two-day meeting consisted of focus groups involving eligible EITC participants, small group sessions with IRS representatives, and large group sessions with speakers who had experienced success with EITC projects in their respective cities, and a large group session that culminated in the development of goals and strategies tailored to the seven states in the Delta Initiative.

NOBCO, with the help of the Delta Initiative partners, developed an agenda for the last workshop session, which resulted in sharing various strategies among states so that all would benefit from every state's input. This was done by placing members from each state in their own group and having them develop strategies to report to the entire group. This was a tremendously successful session because it set the stage for planning to begin on the EITC project throughout the Delta region.

The group leader was charged with eliciting information from group members about ways to encourage citizens who qualify for EITC to file tax returns in their respective states.

Below is a synopsis of what each group reported by state.

Arkansas

- Emphasize marketing, especially to the Latino populations.
- Engage industries (Sam's Club) to host EITC information sites.
- Involve local chambers of commerce, housing authority and human resources departments.
- Send out mailers to people who receive low-income energy assistance.
- Develop telephone help lines using an 800 number.
- Utilize television stations to recruit Volunteer Income Tax Assistants (VITA).
- Include EITC information in food stamp mailings.
- Use Ameri Corps, Municipal League and State Association of Counties to pique interest in EITC.
- Consider tax sites with computer laboratories, schools, libraries and community technology centers.
- Train law students and missionaries as volunteer tax preparers.

Alabama

- Educate staff of Birmingham CAA (406). The CAA serves thousands of low-income clients. CAA staff could also be trained to do outreach so that they can encourage EITC eligible citizens to file their taxes.
- Engage the mayor's office and new county commissioners in the EITC endeavor.
- Build coalitions with faith communities, foundations, city chambers of commerce and the United Way.
- Develop a media campaign and use testimonials from actual beneficiaries of EITC.
- Convene Birmingham CAA, IRS, and DHR to determine what can be done about this issue immediately.

Kentucky

- Involve city, county and state officials in a media campaign.
- Use community newspapers and labor unions to disseminate information.
- Make EITC an agenda item at city council meetings.
- Use local government cable channels to publicize EITC.
- Publicize at the following events and locations:
    - Local universities
    - Neighborhood meetings

    - Festivals
    - Fairs
    - Head Start (and targeted schools)
    - Utilize Title I contacts
    - WIA Offices for outreach purposes
- Use state AARP chapters to provide free tax preparation using their volunteer tax preparers.

Louisiana

- Greatly expand EITC dissemination of information by:
    - Using local radio and television personalities to make this an ongoing news item.
    - Using word of mouth
    - Promoting on public cable access channels
    - Engaging faith based organizations
    - Placing information in utility bill statements
    - Publicize through Department of Motor Vehicles, Bureau of Motor Vehicles, social service agencies and grocery stores.
- Publicize the fact that getting money in a hurry through commercial tax preparers means less money to take home.
- Encourage both financial and social literacy by teaching about direct deposit, saving and asset building.
- Form partnerships with businesses to promote EITC. Impress upon business that this means dollars in their coffers.
- Convince banks to utilize the Community Reinvestment Act and show them that EITC creates a positive business environment.
- Stress the positives and negatives to government about EITC:
    - Positives mean a better economy, an increased tax base, good publicity for the city leaders and the city itself and provide an incentive to work and foster community partnerships.
    - Negatives result in fewer tax dollars, diminishing self-sufficiency, more welfare, higher crime rates and more related issues such as lack of housing.

Mississippi

- Outreach strategies consist of:
    - Media - radio, television and newspapers
    - Educating employers about EITC
    - Forming a Jackson/Hinds County coalition with a telephone number and contact person as a starting point
    - Churches/Civic organizations
    - Flyers and word-of-mouth
    - Developing an EITC website
    - Put information in paychecks

    - Use newsletters
    - Mail material to county residents
    - Speak to neighborhood associations with IRS representatives available or have a local person who is well informed about EITC
    - Use fraternities and sororities
    - Publicize through Jackson State University and use E-City building for training VITA assistants
    - Publicize through housing authorities and the Foundation for the Mid-South
    - Partner through grocery stores for printed EITC bags and also publicize through banks
    - Include information in all utility bill statements
- Utilize head start for publicity.
- Develop a "Mission Mississippi" project and include EITC as one of many foci.
- Identify specific income populations and do target mailings or have face-to-face meetings; and
- Disseminate information during annual church conferences and conventions.

Missouri

- Distribute information in ADFC waiting rooms and educate staff about benefits.
- Have material available at metro-link transit stops and have individuals available during high traffic times prior to the end of the tax-filing deadline.
- Have VITA sites at metro stops and supermarkets.
- Develop and coordinate a statewide plan for distributing, filing and preparing taxes (i.e., use State Treasurer Lost and Found Site).
- Utilize community action network.
- Create an urban agenda with large city mayors using EITC as its core. Also have minority home ownership, homeless service continuum and market awareness as components.
- Expand use of W-5 in "new" employee's packet.
- Distribute EITC brochures through schools.
- Urge the Department of Health and Human Services to develop EITC competitive grants to support outreach campaigns.

Tennessee

- In the immediate future have the city (Nashville) and IRS partner to address EITC issues.
- Involve the mayor and businesses in EITC strategy planning sessions.
- In one year develop VITA sites to aid citizens in preparing returns.
- Form an EITC alliance with the following groups
    - Chamber of Commerce
    - National Organization of 100 Black Women
    - Interdenominational Ministerial Fellowship

- Sprint
- Hewlett Packard
- Frist Foundation
- HCA
- Tennessee State and Fisk Universities
- Bethlehem Centers of Nashville
- 100 Black Men
- Mt. Zion Church
- Popular radio station host(s)

EITC AGENCY RESOURCE REPORT

Although not solicited some agency representatives, after listening and being exposed to the sharing-information process, provided suggestions during the workshop to improve EITC accessibility. They are as follows:

- Have the IRS develop a train the trainer VITA program and also have them lend their tax expertise wherever possible.
- Form a partnership with the American Bar Association and other associations to address EITC issues.
- Provide software support and training to those that have a demonstrated need for it in high EITC areas.
- Provide publications and products in readable/useable forms to encourage more use of EITC.
- Provide technical assistance whenever possible.
- Work with community action agencies to inform them of the nuances of EITC.
- Develop an Hispanic EITC workshop
- Form a tax preparation partnership between Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and the Internal Revenue Service.
- Develop an IRS/HHS urban initiative.

NOBCO believes that many fine suggestions surfaced during the course of the two-day workshops. There were also many common themes that were apparent. What seems to stand out was the use of the church as a common disseminating point. The Black church has always been known as a distribution center of news in the Black community; however, the media, especially radio, appears to rival the church as a mode of communication. This is apparent among community citizens and community leaders and should be taken into consideration when planning a communication campaign about EITC. Other themes included the insertion of EITC information in utility bill statements. Perhaps EITC information could also be available at utility company bill payment centers as many members of the community choose to pay bills in person.

Word of mouth was mentioned quite frequently as a way to disseminate information, as was the use of public access cable channels. One theme that emerged was selling the business community on the economic impact of EITC. How best to work with the IRS in

getting out the EITC message? The economic impact surfaced as a critical point from the workshops preceding the small group sessions.

Some novel ways of disseminating material included the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. Another interesting distribution mode was the availability of material at all metro-link transit stops. The two most original suggestions were building financial and social literacy as an outcome of this process and urging the Department of Health and Human Services to issue competitive grants for the purpose of building EITC outreach capacity.

In analyzing the material presented, it appears as though the number one recommendation for the future is to build marketing plans for each individual state, county or parish. All states have something in common, but each state has its own issues to deal with individually, and this can best be done by developing individual marketing plans.

From the initial workshops held with the Delta Initiative for EITC, all states started on the same page and all states knew what NOBCO and HHS expected of them.

Outcomes

NOBCO has tracked the progress of the Delta Initiative on a regular basis since the January 2003 meeting in Jackson, Mississippi. In accordance with the HHS contract, all states have contact people in place and these individuals represent units such as community action agencies, mayor's offices, union representatives, and county supervisors, police jurors and commissioners. Our Delta EITC Status Update shows that those contact people who are county leaders are making more progress than others, because they already have a voice within their respective areas, and appear to be a trust factor for the targeted population in their states. Further, the targeted states have held follow-up meetings since the January 2003 in Jackson, MI.

The strength of the NOBCO project was that all states have had tremendous success in involving community based organizations and elected partners in the EITC effort. One of the more notable elements in this process is the involvement of the faith-based community. One state had forty churches signed up to plan and work with this effort. NOBCO views this active interest and support as a model for other communities to follow, and NOBCO used it as a tool in sharing information with the other states.

However, NOBCO is pleased to share that all states report utilizing churches in this endeavor. Other strong participating agencies were neighborhood centers, the Urban League, Universities, local IRS offices and various community banks. This speaks volumes for the less than traditional ways of disseminating information throughout the community to reach the target population.

All states have scheduled and/or held press conferences. Many of the Delta Initiative partners working with NOBCO have been very innovative in scheduling press

conferences around the opening of new city or county buildings. Others have scheduled press conferences to coincide with various announcements with public officials while others scheduled conferences to dovetail with release of IRS EITC filings for the tax season.

The National Association of Black County Officials (NABCO) in partnership with NOBCO featured the Delta Initiative EITC Program information in its County to County, which is the Official Publication of the organization, in April 2003 (see attached). Whereas this information was sent to more than 3,000 Black elected and appointed individuals, it was also shared with the attendees of the NOBCO Economic Development Conference in Shreveport, LA, in May 2003, and at the National Association of Counties Annual Conference in Milwaukee, WI, in July 2003. The information presented at these two events raised the awareness level of the county officials and generated future interest and possible partnership(s) to expand the TANF and EITC project efforts.

The strongest part of the EITC effort has to do with types and range of outreach. Some commissioners have scheduled IRS personnel to train head start staff to prepare tax statements. Others have promoted EITC through vehicles such as ministerial community outreach forums. Some have cooperated with businesses to include EITC information on paychecks while others have targeted bus and subway stations postings for awareness. In addition to the HHS Task required with this initiative, many of the partners have developed EITC forums to be repeated throughout the year.

Speakers Bureau

Through the efforts of the NOBCO Delta Initiative EITC Program a Speakers Bureau was developed to support the targeted communities. The attached power-point presentation developed by the IRS was used to further enhance the knowledge base of EITC with those participants attending community meetings. Topics covered during the presentations included Community Based Partnerships, Awareness and Education, Asset Building, and Tax Preparation with the emphasis on How Families Use the EITC. It was recommended that speaker's bureaus be developed using the aforementioned topics to inform the community on the benefits of EITC. (See attached Community Based Partnerships Building Assets … Roadmap to self-sufficiency). The presentation was also shared in a workshop session during the NOBCO Economic Development Conference, May 2003 held in Shreveport, LA, and Jackson, Mississippi.

Through the speakers bureaus the leaders are able to share this information in their communities on the role of the IRS, and why they are interested in community-based partnerships. Additionally, they realized that low-income people do not traditionally understand the role of the IRS; IRS attempts have not effectively reached all targeted audiences, and that information/material from trusted channels, tailored to local needs is more effective.

NOBCO will continue this initiative by offering ongoing consultation to ACF and target Community EITC partnerships. It will also continue to disseminate information to the communities about free tax assistants and IRS toll free lines through its local community leaders.

Future Task

NOBCO recognizes that continual follow-up is necessary to determine the nature and scope of press conferences and success of the many outreach activities. Once this information is reported to NOBCO, it can refine the Delta Project and expand activities to other parts of the nation, notably Michigan, which has taken a proactive interest in the project and has several individuals who are interested in NOBCO's involvement in the state.

NOBCO would like to continue to do the onsite visits to communities to ensure that the projects are on target, and it to also simultaneously assist with the development of tailored marketing plans for each respective state.

Lastly, for those historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) who have been involved, NOBCO will seek to continue having its partners in the targeted Delta communities utilize their services with students, and extend the scope of their involvement with the project. With their support and outreach it will help NOBCO to expand upon the relationships with other colleges. This is an area we believe needs strengthening within the program, therefore, NOBCO will be conducting follow-up meetings with churches and the community contacts in the Delta EITC target areas.

The need for this outreach program has been demonstrated by this first phase. We can look next to see how the funds flowed, and to push the year-to-year individual education necessary to participate in the program.

Summary

- ✓ The seven-month project generated far more interest than the project initially targeted to communities outside of the Delta area;

- ✓ The Delta EITC project opened doors and built relations with in communities of color that were nontraditional, and otherwise would not have been brought to the table in a partnership, which needs to be continued to reach more people in the Delta area and beyond.

- ✓ The success of the 2003 project was officially disseminated by NOBCO less than ninety days before taxes were to be filed for tax year 2002. It is difficult to evaluate its success in such a short period of time. Second, NOBCO can assist in a more comprehensive marketing plan with the Delta Project, because more time

enables the organization to assist states in developing and refining these plans. Third, other states (such as Michigan) want to develop their own EITC marketing plans. They are waiting to see what methods to capitalize on and what pitfalls to avoid based on the Delta Project.

- ✓ Through the NOBCO network the EITC information provided by HHS has been a solid tool that enabled the organization to disseminate information to communities of color as a valued support network, that otherwise for most families had never been shared, to make a difference in their lives.

Attached for review is a copy of the Delta EITC Status Update developed by NOBCO on the many activities of the communities involved with the project during the past seven months.

In closing, NOBCO has had the assistance of many individuals, counties, cities and agencies with this project. The project goals of providing information about TANF and increasing the number of TANF/EITC recipients and getting local health service agencies to focus on increasing the number of TANF claims was successful. The project team is ready to assist in future efforts, and to continue the EITC marketing aspects. NOBCO has developed a team that has participated in the Delta Initiative since its inception and can provide outstanding service and assistance in developing and planning short, intermediate, and long range planning strategies to accomplish both TANF and EITC goals and objectives.