

Grace at Work August 2023

Volunteer Tax Preparation Assistance A Huge Success

LSS of Northern California (LSS) launched a new program (and partnership) for the 2023 tax season: providing income tax preparation assistance to current and former foster youth. California is the only state in the country that offers a foster youth tax credit, and the filing assistance for these youth occurs through the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. LSS offered these new services in Sacramento and Concord, however, there was such interest that we also assisted youth in Oakland, Stockton and other areas. LSS offered the service in person and online.



With little background in employment or tax filing, many transition aged youth either avoid filing taxes or complete them on their own, and in doing so, often fail to know the nuances and tax credits for which they qualify.

“One of our service areas is transition aged youth emancipating from foster care, experiencing homelessness or at-risk of homelessness,” notes LSS CEO Carol Roberts. “The VITA program has been a fantastic way for us to more broadly guide and support them to stable housing and more positive futures.”



Working in collaboration with our partners, State of California Franchise Tax Board, United Ways of California and John Burton Advocates for Youth, the LSS team helped youth complete **198 state and federal returns for \$171,006 in refunds**. This is money that most of these youth would not have secured without this assistance, money that helped them cover housing costs, purchase necessities and dream.

LSS staff Emerald Balonso and Jennifer Vasquez led a team of 14 volunteers to assist these young people, most of whom had never filed taxes previously.

One of our incredible volunteers was Ruben Badilla, an LSS youth program case manager. Ruben volunteered outside of his regular work schedule because he has experience in tax preparation. “About ten years ago I worked at the IRS,” he explains, “where I learned about how taxes worked, the ways people could get tax credits and increase their refunds, so I started helping family and friends file their taxes. I enjoyed helping people get their maximum refund. When Emerald asked for volunteers, I thought I have experience doing that, and I wanted to give back, to use my knowledge to help these youth.”

After completing his formal tax volunteer training, Ruben then went on to assist a dozen youth in Sacramento. Most of these were online, although four youth met him in person.

“Seeing the excitement of the youth when they saw how much money they were being refunded and how they could use the money for their essential needs—buy a car, get items for their kids, purchase some household items—made this a fantastic experience,” Ruben explains. “I can’t wait to do it again next year.”

The tremendous success of this year’s program not only ensured that LSS will participate again next year, but also, expand the program into San Joaquin, Shasta and Yolo counties. We are looking forward to another year of serving our youth population. Stay tuned for opportunities to volunteer and updates on the 2023 VITA program.



Zak's Closet Gets an Upgrade

It has been only 18 months since LSS of Northern California reopened Zak’s Closet, our free clothing boutique for transgender and nonbinary youth in Sacramento, but we are pleased to share that this August we are reopening with a newly revamped center. This is thanks to Boy Scout Kai Nakaoka, a Sacramento high school rising senior who took on Zak’s Closet as an Eagle Scout Project.

The project included constructing new shelving and a jewelry holder, as well as conducting a massive drive that yielded more than 1,200 articles of clothing, accessories, jewelry and make-up. “Five different organizations participated with the drive,” Kai shares, “my elementary school, a Mormon church, my own church, the California Scholarship Federation (CSF) and the Key Club of my high school.”





To be awarded the rank of Eagle Scout, each participant must fulfill several requirements, including the planning and development of “a service project helpful to any religious institution, any school, or your community.” The scout must also show leadership in the execution of the project by engaging volunteers and others.

“I reached out to my troop and brother troop the CSF club where I was the vice-president and Key Club at my school,” Kai says. Kai’s father and a woodworking mentor assisted in the construction of the display units.

“It’s been very surprising,” notes Kai, “the amount of support this project has gotten from different areas. Many people didn’t just donate; they donated good, quality items.”

Kai selected this project, because “I am LGBT myself, along with many of my friends. Many of my friends had to keep their sexuality secret, and if their parents found out, had to make alternate living arrangements. I wanted to help out youth like my friends.”

Kai was connected to LSS and Zak’s Closet coordinator, housing navigation specialist Trina Menses, via LSS Board Member Mary Lynn Perry in a hula class.



Even at age 16, Kai is very clear on having certain life advantages that other teenagers in similar situations do not. “What has gotten me so far in my life,” Kai notes, “is having a good group of people connected to me.”

Currently, the donations are being sorted, arranged and shelved in the newly designed Zak’s Closet, which will reopen again at the end of August. Located in downtown Sacramento, the boutique will be open on Fridays from 9am to noon by appointment only. Transgender and nonbinary youth may contact Trina Menses at tmenses@lssnorcal.org to schedule an appointment.

"God's work. Our hands." Sunday



Sept. 10
2023

"God's Work. Our Hands" Activities

LSS of Northern California is partnering with the Sierra-Pacific Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to provide opportunities for Lutheran congregations (and others who are so moved) to participate in God's Work, Our Hands Sunday. God's Work Our Hands takes place on Sunday, September 10.

LSS invites our friends to hold one of the following activities:

- **New Underwear Drive:** Collect adult-sized underwear and bras (new only) for foster youth and homeless youth. (No socks, please.)
- **Welcome Baskets:** Collect items such as door mats, candles, dish towels, bagged candy, mug with tea/coffee/hot cocoa items for newly housed seniors and families to welcome them into their new apartments.
- **Bagged Lunches and Continental Breakfasts:** Gather items such as sandwiches, granola bars, water/juice bottles, individually wrapped crackers and cookie, oranges and apples, jelly and peanut butter packs, napkins and plastic silverware for food insecure seniors, adults and youth and pack items together for meals we can hand out. (We'll pick them up!)

You don't have to participate only on September 10. You don't even have to be a Lutheran. Gather family, friends and coworkers together to conduct one of these projects.

Contact us at volunteers@lssnorcal.org!

Our Mission

To promote stability and honor the dignity of those we serve by providing supportive housing services that lead to self-sufficiency.