

An Initiative to Increase Awareness of the Benefits of Tax Filing, New Westminster

Tax filing efforts in New Westminster

- There were at least 5,244 adults (25+ years old) who did not file taxes in New Westminster in 2015.
- Research was done on tax filing clinics by reviewing best practices in other communities, as well as doing a survey on all free tax filing organizations in New Westminster.
- Tax filing and the resultant accessing of government benefits can boost income significantly. Increasing tax filing is therefore a poverty reduction measure being used by the New Westminster Poverty Reduction Committee.
- A working group from the Community Poverty Reduction Committee is working to increase awareness about the importance of and potential benefits to be derived from filing a tax return. The City of New Westminster, Family Services of Greater Vancouver (FSGV) and the MCFD Community Development Worker have been leading the committee's tax filing initiative with assistance from many other partners.
- The working group coordinated and planned three additional tax filing or income boosting clinics for New Westminster from November 2018 to March 2019.
- The group also promoted other free tax filing clinics in New Westminster both locally and regionally through a range of channels (social media, local newspapers, New Westminster Public Library, mail-outs, word of mouth etc.).
- Other tax filing clinics, apart from those run by the Poverty Reduction working group, helped approximately 3,028 people in New Westminster during the tax season in the spring 2019. Seniors seem to be a major group that were helped by these clinics.
- A range of people attended the tax filing clinics planned through the Poverty Reduction working group. This included students, low or modest income people, persons with disabilities, those from transition housing, seniors and low wage workers.
- These clinics provided accessible tax filing services to underserved populations. The clinics showed a need for additional accessible tax filing services.

Recommendations and findings

1) A variety of clinics at different locations should be offered in New Westminster.

The clinics showed us there is a need for additional accessible tax filing services. Potential locations are: the New Westminster Public Library main branch, New Westminster River Market, Sapperton Pensioners Hall and Union Gospel Mission. There appears to be a need for additional tax filing services for non-seniors in the Brow of the Hill and Uptown areas, as well as homeless persons.

2) Pay additional attention to the low wage workforce needs for tax filing.

Many tax filing clinics are not open at times that are convenient to low wage workers, including shift workers. Having accessible clinics at different times and places available could increase tax filing.

- 3) Develop a coordinated multi-partner approach to promote tax filing in New Westminster.**
Contact with participants at the clinics and telephone enquiries showed some lack of awareness about tax filing services in New Westminster. Several lists are distributed related to free tax filing services. Some of these lists are missing different clinics and some are difficult to find on-line. We need to work with partners to make sure that tax filing clinics and promotion of these clinics are well-coordinated.
- 4) Assist people in learning how to file their own taxes.**
Several participants asked if they could be shown how to file their own taxes. Workshops on how to file your own taxes and getting prepared for tax season should be offered.
- 5) Have other services available at tax filing clinics.**
Having other services available at the clinics is useful as it provides sign posting to other services when people are waiting to get their taxes filed. Other service providers at the tax clinics can assist with access to other benefits and services that the tax filers may be entitled to. Providing financial coaching to clients could assist with managing large tax refunds to help build financial security.
- 6) Simplify filing for parents, including children's SIN numbers.**
Filing for parents could be simplified as it affects eligible benefits. The necessity of requests for children's SIN numbers should be reviewed.

In conclusion

The tax filing initiative aims to boost income through tax filing and support with accessing benefits. Evidence from Canada, the U.S.A. and other areas shows that many low-income people can quickly boost their incomes sometimes by as much as 50% if they have the tools and strategies to claim and receive all the government benefits they're entitled to. Offering free tax clinics in 2018 and 2019 meant populations that may be unable to file taxes easily were served. The tax filing initiative showed us that even low cost tax services may be prohibitive for those wanting to file taxes. The location and timing of further free tax clinics and workshops should be planned in conjunction with other agencies to ensure a coordinated approach which will maximise efforts. Training should be offered to citizens on how to complete simple tax returns and how to prepare for tax season.