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Hispanic Unity of Florida Announces Receiving Recognition by the IRS in the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program

Miami, Fla. April 2018 – Hispanic Unity of Florida (HUF) is pleased to announce it has received national recognition by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in the Celebrating Champions of Caring: Partnership Innovation and Best Practices category for its service excellence in the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program in Broward County. Out of 2,500 national VITA providers, 22 were nominated under this category-- only two received this distinction.

The VITA program, established by the IRS in 1969, offers safe, effective and free tax preparation services to 3.3 million individuals with low-to-moderate incomes, the elderly, disabled and/or tax filers with limited English proficiency across the country. VITA is a vibrant community effort with five thousand VITA sites that recruit, train and certify more than 90 thousand local volunteers. It provides over \$3.3 billion in refunds nationwide, and saves tax filers at least \$242 million in tax preparation fees. At VITA sites, tax filers maximize refundable tax credits that often go unclaimed, such as the Child Tax Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit—widely regarded as one of the most effective federal anti-poverty programs. While its biggest impact is felt on the individuals and families it serves, the benefits of the program extend to the communities it enriches, as recipients invest much of their refunds back into their locally economies every year.

In Broward County, the VITA program is driven by dozens of community organizations, partners, funders, elected officials (called VITA Champions), and a network of dedicated volunteers-- who are the lifeblood of the program and get recruited every year through HandsOn Broward.

Under the leadership and the auspices of Children’s Services Council of Broward County (CSC), HUF –a VITA provider for 16 years– has administered the resources of the Broward VITA Coalition (BVC) for the past seven years.

Last year, \$6.2 million in taxes were refunded to nearly six thousand tax filers through the Coalition efforts. Services are provided at 18 site locations across the county in multiple languages, including English, Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian-Creole and American Sign Language.

Eight years ago, HUF identified an opportunity to empower its 150+ VITA volunteers in order to improve the VITA client experience. The VITA program serves a very diverse and multicultural client base. HUF worked with leaders at two organizations, the Center for Independent Living of Broward and Perspectives Unlimited Inc., to design and implement new training components on Sensitivity Awareness, Cultural Competency, and Customer Service. This was added to the 50-hour VITA training curriculum. The new client-centric model resulted in a 98 percent client satisfaction rate given by clients to the Coalition, and a 95 percent satisfaction rate by the VITA volunteers.

“VITA is one of the best examples of community collaboration we have in Broward County,” said Josie Bacallao, HUF President & CEO. “This recognition by the IRS acknowledges what we’ve always known about our community being regarded as collaboration central”.

Today, the VITA program in Broward has grown to include an extensive menu of financial capability services. VITA recipients are also connected to HUF’s Center for Working Families (CWF) services, which provides customized financial education and planning for clients, including small business owners, who are seeking to improve their financial well-being by building up savings and credit ratings, paying down debts, and are considering long-term investments, such as homeownership, and more.

“When the idea of leading VITA efforts was brought to me by our Chief Communications Officer, Sandra Bernard-Bastien, more than 15 years ago, I admit I wasn’t sold on its relevance to the mission of our organization,” says CSC President/CEO Cindy Arenberg Seltzer. “It all became very clear after that first year. Dramatically improving the economic condition of thousands of working families in Broward means better outcomes in family strengthening, physical and emotional wellbeing, literacy and academic performance in children and so much more. I am proud of our partnerships and especially the amazing work Hispanic Unity has done in implementing the program.”

We would like to congratulate St. Thomas University in Miami for also being recognized in the Partnership Innovation and Best Practices category, along with HUF. Special thanks to the IRS team for nominating HUF: Nora Campos, IRS-Interim Plantation Territory Manager, Stakeholder Partnership, Education, and Communication, and to Charris Harrell, IRS-Wage & Investment, SPEC Area 2-Plantation Territory, as well as the Prosperity Now team for their support: Rebecca M. Thompson, Project Director, Taxpayer Opportunity Network, and Justin Chu, Program Associate, Field Engagement, Tax Payer Opportunity Network.

This community-wide initiative is made possible thanks to the Children’s Services Council (CSC), United Way of Broward County, IRS, Citi Community Development, and Hispanic Unity of Florida (HUF). Other

key partners and funders include: HandsOn Broward, Community Access Center, Broward County, Broward County Family Success, Broward County Libraries, 211 Broward, Broward College, DeVry University, Bank of America, SunTrust Bank, Third Federal Savings & Loan, and Latin2Latin Marketing + Communications.

VITA Champions and cities promoting the program throughout Broward include civic leaders, mayors and commissioners, who engage in outreach on behalf of the program to its residents: Broward County, City of Tamarac, City of Oakland Park, City of Coral Springs, City of Hollywood, as well as the City of Pembroke Pines, City of Miramar, City of Plantation, and City of Pompano Beach.

Kudos to HUF's stellar VITA team: Ingrid Ekblad, Economic Development Associate Director, Ana Maria Ceballos, VITA Program Manager and Wolf Thomas, VITA Program Support Specialist for their consistent dedication and hard work. We would also like to extend our appreciation to the many VITA staffers, volunteers, and to our incredible partners and funders – and to our elected officials who have been VITA Champions.

To learn more about VITA, please visit: www.VITATaxesFree.org.

Would you like to support the VITA program? To become a VITA volunteer, or if you are an elected official and wish to become a VITA Champion, please contact Ana Maria Ceballos, VITA and Small Business Services, Program Manager, Hispanic Unity of Florida, Tel: 954.342.0428, aceballos@hispanicunity.org.

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About Hispanic Unity of Florida, Inc. (HUF)

Hispanic Unity of Florida (HUF) is a non-profit founded more than 36 years ago by community leaders to ease the acculturation transition for newcomers from other nations. Today, HUF provides assistance through 12 programs and 30+ services in four languages to South Florida's diverse community. HUF, an UnidosUS Affiliate, is one of South Florida's largest agencies dedicated to the immigrant population, providing them with the tools they need to build a new life. In 2017, the agency served more than 15,000 children and families. HUF offers assistance at two administrative offices, 12 school sites, 18 free tax preparation sites and 20 citizenship services sites in South Florida. For more information, please visit www.hispanicunity.org or call (954) 964-8884, ext. 216. Follow us on online: [Facebook.com/Hispanicunity.org](https://www.facebook.com/Hispanicunity.org). Twitter: [@hispanicunity.org](https://twitter.com/hispanicunity.org).