

# The Times-Tribune

# Editorial

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 28, 2019

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## Tax program aids working families

**BY GARY DRAPEK**  
GUEST COLUMNIST

Recently, Congress passed — and the president signed — the Taxpayer First Act, which made the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program permanent.

VITA is now law and millions of taxpayers can count on this critical program for tax seasons to come. Locally, the United Way of Lackawanna and Wayne Counties has operated the VITA program for more than a decade. This program is staffed by local IRS-certified volunteer tax preparers and provides free preparation and electronic filing of federal and state tax returns for any individual who earns less than

\$54,000 annually.

Last year, our volunteers completed close to 2,800 free tax returns, saving residents \$411,750 in tax return preparation fees. That brought in almost \$900,000 in earned income tax credits and returned \$2,796,330 in federal tax refunds to low- and moderate-income working families and seniors. This has become a vitally important service to thousands in our region, helping to provide financial stability to those in need.



**DRAPEK**

Gary Drapek is president and CEO of the United Way of Lackawanna and Wayne Counties.

VITA volunteers ensure each return is prepared accurately, and that those who qualify can access the earned income tax credit and child tax credit. These tax

credits allow workers to keep more of what they earn to pay for things like reliable transportation to work, child care, housing and groceries. Hard-working families and individuals in our communities rely on these credits. In 2018, almost \$1 million earned income credit refunds were put back into the pockets of working families in Lackawanna and Wayne counties, to be reinvested in our community.

The credit is one of the best tools we have to promote work and fight poverty, lifting about 6 million Americans out of poverty annually. Only those who work are eligible and recipients use it to move up the economic ladder to financial stability. It is a tax policy critical in reducing the financial burden of low-income, working families and

has even led to improved health outcomes for mothers and their children.

But millions of working Americans are shut out from the powerful effects of this credit: people not raising children at home. In fact, 5 million Americans are taxed into poverty each year largely because they access little to no earned income tax credit.

Congress can expand this common-sense tax policy for workers who do not raise children at home by increasing the size of the credit for this group and lowering the age of eligibility. In Pennsylvania alone, at least 554,000 workers would benefit from this type of expansion, giving them the tools necessary to cover the basics and contribute more to our local economy.