



REPORT

Detroit Child Tax Credit Campaign Final Evaluation Report

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act expanded the existing federal Child Tax Credit to provide increased financial benefits to a wider range of families, offering a historic opportunity to significantly reduce child poverty in Detroit. For the first time, families with no taxes owed could get the full refund, in addition to families with no earnings. The full benefit amount also increased from \$2,000 per child to \$3,000-\$3,600 per child. The IRS disbursed the first half of each family's credit in a series of six monthly payments from July to December 2021, as an advance payment of their 2022 tax credit. To determine eligibility and receive payment, each family needed to have filed 2019 or 2020 taxes. To get the second half of payments, each family needed to file 2021 taxes again this year.

Under the CTC expansion, a family of three children, including two under six years of age, would be eligible for \$10,200. There are significant positive benefits to children when parent income increases, even by a small amount, including gains in academic achievement¹ health, and overall development² In 2021, at least 9,000 Detroit caregivers with children risked missing out on the CTC and its attendant benefits because they did not claim those children on their 2019 or 2020 taxes.³ The Kresge Foundation and United Way for Southeastern Michigan launched the Detroit Child Tax Credit campaign with a group of community partnersⁱ in early 2021 to ensure these families took action to receive their payments. The Kellogg Foundation, Skillman Foundation, and Ballmer Group contributed funding alongside Kresge.

This evaluation report outlines the campaign's main activities, assesses campaign outcomes, and shares perspectives from partners on the core strengths and challenges of the campaign's local approach to promoting the expanded Child Tax Credit.ⁱⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all data cited in this report comes from campaign records and the author's interviews with community outreach partners and campaign steering committee members.

SUMMARY

- Both logistical barriers and misperceptions about the adverse consequences of filing taxes present obstacles to filing for many Detroit residents.
- To ensure all eligible families receive the Child Tax Credit, the campaign 1) deployed community outreach partners to spread information and encourage residents to make tax preparation appointments; and 2) launched a marketing and communications campaign to disseminate information to the general public in Detroit.
 - The campaign succeeded in spreading information and awareness about the Child Tax Credit to thousands of families across the city, as measured by a significant volume of web traffic to the United Way's Get the Tax Facts website (140,000 hits), a

ⁱ Accounting Aid Society, Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency, City of Detroit, Poverty Solutions, and Community Development Advocates of Detroit.

ⁱⁱ For brevity, we refer to the expanded Child Tax Credit as the tax credit, CTC, or the credit throughout.

website created for the campaign. According to U-M survey data from fall 2021, the vast majority of Detroiters eligible for the CTC were aware of it (93%).⁴

- The most successful outreach activities, according to the limited available data, were texts and phone calls. Texts yielded high levels of website hits, while phone banking resulted in more appointments made compared to other outreach activities.
- **Residents made just over 2,380 tax preparation appointments on the campaign website, resulting in an estimated 1,184 federal tax returns filed with VITA providers. This suggests that Detroit families received at least \$6.5 million in Child Tax Credits as a result of campaign activities.** We made a number of assumptions to arrive at these estimates, so they should be interpreted with significant caution.
- Between 2021 and 2022, Michigan saw a statewide decrease in tax filings among households with dependents (5.7%), but the decrease was smaller among Detroit households (3.8%). In addition, despite a 4% decrease in returns filed by families with three or more dependents in Michigan, **Detroit saw a 4% increase in returns filed by larger families.** These results suggest the campaign may have influenced filing behavior beyond VITA sites.
- The campaign's main challenges were 1) finding families who do not typically file taxes; and 2) quantifying the impact of specific community outreach activities. In addition, tax preparers noted the high rate of appointments that did not result in a return, due to no-shows and the phenomenon of individuals making tax prep appointments to ask questions rather than complete a tax return.
- The campaign unified several community agencies that had not worked together previously, creating an infrastructure that city leaders can tap into for other campaigns. The local Detroit tax credit campaign leveraged community organizations to spread Michigan-specific information about tax benefits, going beyond messages shared by national organizations.

This report is divided into four sections. First, we outline barriers to filing taxes, followed by a discussion of the Detroit Child Tax Credit campaign's main activities. Next, we share available data on campaign outcomes. Last, we summarize findings from interviews with core campaign partners on the strengths, challenges and lessons learned from the year.

BARRIERS TO FILING TAXES

Each year, between 18-20% of Detroit households do not file federal income taxes,⁵ due to a variety of reasons, including the lack of a federal filing requirement for those with low income. In this section, we briefly outline some of the key barriers to filing taxes, including new challenges posed by the complexity of the expanded Child Tax Credit.

First, some Detroiters face **logistical barriers to filing tax returns**. To complete taxes virtually requires internet access, but 14% of Detroit households do not have consistent internet access at home. Of households without internet, two-thirds are not within a five-minute walk of a computer or an internet connection.⁶ Although tax preparers offer in-person services, these

appointments require transportation and childcare, the latter due to COVID protocols limiting the number of visitors to VITA sites.

Some residents must navigate complex family or financial situations when determining how and whether to file taxes. Many parents share custody of their children, and in a typical arrangement will alternate years in which they claim their children on their taxes. But IRS policy regarding the expanded Child Tax Credit made these kinds of arrangements much more complicated.

In summer 2021, the IRS rolled out the expanded Child Tax Credit by making estimated advance payments of 2022 tax refunds, using information from 2021, 2020, or 2019 tax returns to determine eligibility. This meant that Parent A who (correctly) claimed their children on their 2020 tax return would have automatically received payments in 2021, even if Parent B was supposed to claim their children on their 2021 tax return. Parent A could opt-out of receiving payments and allow parent B to (correctly) claim the children and receive payment in 2022 – by taking action to refuse advance payments, a potentially unlikely scenario.

Beyond family situations, the decision to file taxes can be also complicated for residents with irregular incomes. Service providers interviewed by Poverty Solutions highlighted the experience of **parents with unpredictable or seasonal incomes**, who had not filed taxes in recent years and **feared receiving a large bill of back taxes**. “Your contractors, your carpenters, your electricians, all these folks that are out here doing your skilled trade labor, often make significant incomes, but haven’t been shown how to withhold money monthly or frequently,” said a non-profit service provider. “The difference between them and us is our taxes are taken out at a regular, steady pace, theirs are not, and, at the end of the year, when they file, they get this \$3,000 bill from the IRS [and] they’re like wtf.”⁷

There are **unique barriers to filing taxes in immigrant communities**. First, some families with undocumented members hesitate to file for fear that it may alert Immigration and Customs Enforcement to their presence in the country. Of course, many undocumented workers overcome those fears and do file taxes, using individual taxpayer identification numbers (ITINs) in lieu of social security numbers. But to receive an ITIN, the applicant must mail in proof of identity and legal status. For some non-citizens, to do so would mean mailing in a passport, which may be their primary or only identification document—this could present undesirable risks for undocumented individuals.⁸

Fears of other adverse financial consequences, though largely unfounded, may also have prevented some households from filing taxes to access their credit. “Families questioned was the CTC something that was trustworthy, *no strings attached*, or could there be repercussions if they were to participate,” wrote one community partner. Although the Child Tax Credit is not considered income, some families had the perception that receiving the credit could lead to a loss of means-tested benefits like SNAP or other credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit. In addition, some individuals assumed that if you did not have an income tax filing requirement, due to low or no income, you were not eligible for the Child Tax Credit and *could not* file taxes to receive the credit.⁹ Of course, this misunderstanding stems from individuals’ prior experiences with tax policy, which often ties benefits to earned income.

Misperceptions may have led a significant number of parents to believe they were not eligible to receive the credit. According to a Detroit Metropolitan Area Communities Survey fielded in late November 2021, more than 1 in 10 Detroit residents estimated to be eligible for the CTC reported they did not believe their family was eligible. Black parents (12%) were particularly likely to report they did not think they were eligible, compared to White parents (2%) and Latino parents (3%).¹⁰

To help residents navigate some of these barriers to accessing the credit, the Detroit CTC campaign trained staff at community organizations on how to respond to common concerns and maintained a website with extensive FAQs. The following section further details the campaign's main activities, which were designed to share accurate information about the credit and encourage caregivers – especially those without a filing requirement – to file their taxes.

CAMPAIGN ACTIVITIES

Funded Community Partner Outreach

During the summer and fall of 2021, the campaign funded 13 community outreach partners to perform outreach and community engagement to spread awareness of the expanded CTC.ⁱⁱⁱ By the spring of 2022, 6 outreach partners continued these efforts, while also adding messages about the earned income tax credit into their communications.

All funded partners found that it was very difficult, if not impossible, to identify caregivers who did not typically file their taxes, and instead focused their outreach more broadly on families with children. Indeed, we interviewed one community partner from the 2021 outreach campaign who declined to participate in the 2022 outreach campaign due to this difficulty. They noted that most if not all families they spoke with had already filed their taxes and did not feel they would be able to reach additional families with additional funds.

Spring 2022 Outreach:

All partners posted information about the CTC on their social media channels, sent emails, and distributed flyers in high traffic locations. Among the face-to-face strategies, all of the partners tabled at community locations and community events (e.g. The Commons laundromat/café, Easter egg hunt, Detroit public library), and most did some door-to-door canvassing. Relatively few partners used phone or text outreach messaging strategies. The partners also shared information about the Earned Income Tax Credit, although the CTC was the main focus of the effort.

Originally, the campaign planned for the partners to help individuals navigate barriers to tax filing or perform repeat-touch outreach to individuals after obtaining their contact information. In practice, the CBO partners reported they did not have the capacity to help residents overcome barriers like obtaining identification or finding childcare. The majority of community partners were most comfortable with one-touch engagement, which entailed speaking with residents about the credit, and if the type of outreach activity allowed, helping arrange tax prep

ⁱⁱⁱ For more detailed information on fall outreach campaign activities, see Poverty Solutions' [interim evaluation report](#).

appointments on the spot. However, two partners—Central Detroit Christian and Congress of Communities—chose to follow up with individuals on a one-on-one basis, with some success, as discussed later in this report.

The community outreach partners met biweekly to discuss their activities, learn about outreach opportunities, and ask questions about the mechanics of the tax credit. Most of the partners found these meetings to be useful and appreciated connecting with each other to learn about their respective strategies. Partners also occasionally used the meetings to share outreach opportunities and recruit others to join.

Other Community Partners

The campaign shared information about the CTC with community-based organizations, government agencies (Detroit at Work and Detroit Public Schools Community District, for example) and larger institutional partners (Henry Ford Health System and the Early Learning Community, for example), asking them to disseminate CTC messages to their constituents. In contrast to the funded partners, this group of community partners did not receive funding to support this work and were only expected to incorporate messaging about the CTC into their existing workflow, rather than create new outreach strategies. To equip frontline staff with key CTC messages, Poverty Solutions conducted a series of training sessions for institutional partners. We delivered this training to 70+ frontline staff at other community agencies, including 50 Detroit Public Schools counselors, social workers, and administrative staff. The campaign also leveraged canvassing efforts of other city initiatives, integrating messaging into tax foreclosure prevention canvassing and vaccine hesitancy canvassing scripts.

Partners shared information in a variety of ways, including:

- 500,000 texts sent to families through various communications networks, including Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Henry Ford Health Systems' Women-Inspired Neighborhood Network^{iv} and Detroit Public Schools Community District's network. **MDHHS texts were highly successful, reaching up to 140,000 residents per text and resulting in a 10% click rate.**
- Placed ads in ethnic media outlets: Arab American News and El Central.
- Economic mobility coaches discussed the credit with clients in coaching sessions.
- Childcare providers included CTC messages on the phone app that parents and childcare providers use to communicate.

KEY MESSAGES

- ✓ File taxes and you could receive thousands in tax credits.
- ✓ What could you do with \$3000 or more per child? File taxes and find out!
- ✓ Tax prep providers offer expert, no-cost help with filing.
- ✓ The CTC does not count as income for benefits, including SNAP.
- ✓ You may be eligible for the CTC even if you don't usually file taxes and have no/low earnings.

^{iv} This network focuses on improving infant mortality rates and improving equity in birth outcomes in Detroit.

Marketing and Communications

United Way led marketing and communications efforts for the coalition, and created a campaign website, flyers, and sample digital marketing materials for outreach purposes. To compose the main messages of these materials, the organization leveraged national survey research conducted by Poverty Solutions around the potential effectiveness of various CTC-related messages. Additional activities included:

United Way developed a tax prep scheduling tool for the campaign website, enabling individuals to choose between multiple options for filing with tax prep providers on one portal.

- United Way secured both paid and earned media coverage, and disseminated messages on United Way social media, email, and text lists. The marketing and communications team put out digital ads on Facebook and Google, ads on mobile apps, and secured TV spots on local news. One particularly creative marketing tactic put CTC ads on televisions playing in doctor's offices, yielding over 23,000 ad plays. The team also contracted with Outlier Media to launch a two-week promotional campaign around tax time, which sent a push text to 12,705 Detroiters. However, this strategy did not yield strong results: just 176 users opted to learn more about filing their taxes and 6 visited the Get the Tax Facts website.
- Throughout the campaign, steering committee members and CBO partners presented information about the CTC at an estimated 20 community events—town halls, family fun days and press conferences.
- Using A/B testing on texts to MDHHS clients, **we determined that a message emphasizing that the CTC was a cash payment versus a tax credit resulted in more Get The Tax Facts website clicks** (Figure 1). MDHHS texts typically resulted in a large spike in web traffic and more modest spikes in appointments scheduled.
- Poverty Solutions worked with the City of Detroit to set up a texting service that would allow Detroit residents to text questions they had about the Child Tax Credit to a single phone number. Questions were collected and answered by University of Michigan students, trained by Poverty Solutions staff. The initiative proved unsuccessful, as the number received a remarkably low number of questions (<10), and questions that were asked through the service were often too broad to be properly answered through a text-based conversation.

Figure 1.

Message 1 → 744 website URL clicks

What could you do with a few thousand \$? File taxes to receive big cash payments, even if you aren't working.

Message 2 → 618 website URL clicks

What could you do with a few thousand \$? File a tax return to claim the new Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit.

CAMPAIGN OUTCOMES

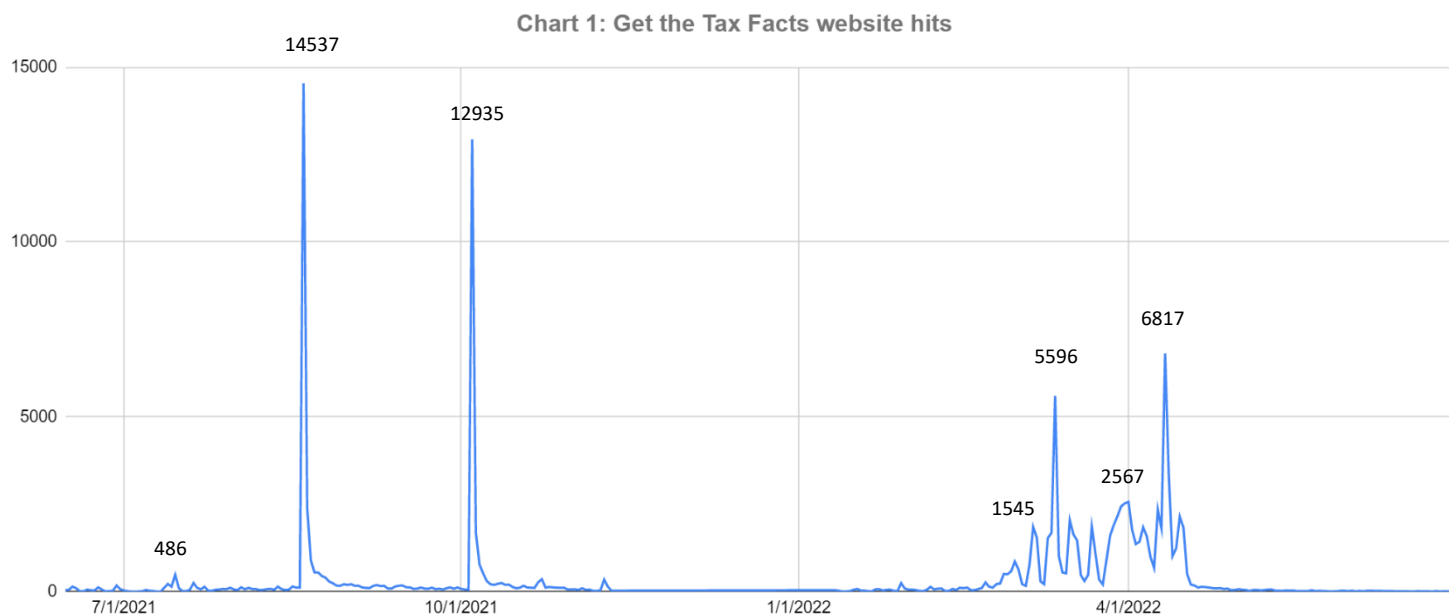
The coalition intended for its campaign activities to 1) drive traffic to the campaign website and/or 2-1-1; 2) increase CTC awareness; and 3) result in successful tax prep appointments with VITA sites. Although all messages were directed at all families with children, we particularly intended to reach non-filer households. To what extent did this campaign achieve these main goals?

Overall, the Detroit Child Tax Credit campaign **succeeded in sharing information about the tax credit** and free tax preparation services with thousands of families across the city. However, given the level of resources dedicated to the work, the campaign yielded **fewer than expected tax preparation appointments and completed tax returns**. The campaign was also unable to determine to what extent non-filer households, versus regular filers, made appointments and filed returns.

Significant Website Traffic

The campaign successfully drove traffic to the Get The Tax Facts page, which attracted just over 130,000 hits between June 2021 and 2022. This is a notable accomplishment, given the novelty of the website and brand. Web traffic was significantly higher during the 2022 phase of the campaign, reaching 80,233 hits compared to 2021's 50,526.

2022 website traffic increased steadily alongside outreach, marketing, and communications efforts, ramping up in February and March and peaking on Tax Day. Last year's website traffic followed a different pattern, remaining relatively low and steady throughout the summer and fall, but hitting higher peaks after MDHHS texts (Chart 1).



Among outreach events, Michigan Department of Health and Services texts, DPSCD newsletter/texts, Early Learning Community outreach emails, and Henry Ford Health Systems texts seemed to produce the highest spikes in website traffic. For example, on March 13, there were 1,682 visitors to the website, but by March 14, the same day as an MDHHS text and Henry Ford network email and text went out, web traffic increased to 5,596 visitors. However, this data should be interpreted with caution, since there were several spikes in web traffic which did not have a listed outreach event on the spreadsheet used to generate this analysis.

Awareness and Engagement

The community partners succeeded in disseminating messages about the Child Tax Credit to their constituents and contributing to a more financially aware community. Three organizations—Congress of Communities, International Institute of Metro Detroit, and MACC Development—kept track of individual conversations in 2022, and as a group spoke with 4,300 families about the credit. **If all six partners performed outreach at a similar rate this year, the organizations may have reached as many as 8,700 families with tax credit messages in 2022.**

Several community partners pointed to increased community knowledge about tax credits as a positive outcome, despite the challenges of finding non-filers. One community partner said of their efforts, “I think some people were getting the money without realizing what was going on. It was good for them to understand the bigger picture on *why* this was happening. [We told] them if it didn’t come through, what they should do, gave them the number that they should call or the website that they should go to make sure that they had the right address or the right bank.” Another partner said: “I think that broadly people were better informed about it and knew why they were getting these payments. I have a feeling that at least a couple of families applied that wouldn’t have known or done that otherwise.”

In addition to increasing resident knowledge of the Child Tax Credit, community partners also shared information about VITA tax preparation to many residents who were not already aware of the services. While phone banking, Congress of Communities staff spoke with a number of residents who had already engaged private preparers but said they would pursue free tax prep at a VITA site next year.

Citywide, most Detroiters were aware of the expanded Child Tax Credit by the end of 2021. According to a DMACS survey fielded in November 2021, **the vast majority (93%) of Detroiters estimated to be eligible^v for the expanded Child Tax Credit said they were aware of it.**¹¹ However, not all groups of Detroiters were equally aware of the credit, reflecting the challenges in disseminating information to the city’s diverse population. The data shows significant differences in awareness of the CTC by education level and language spoken at home.

- Among Detroiters estimated to be CTC-eligible, the group with less than a high school credential was least likely to be aware of the tax credit (85%). Nearly all Detroit

^v DMACS researchers considered a household to be CTC eligible if they were: 1) the custodial parent or guardian of someone younger than 18, and 2) living in a household that earned \$100,000 or less in annual income.

residents who had some college education or more and were estimated to be CTC-eligible (98%) were aware of the Child Tax Credit.

- Detroiters who speak English at home were more likely to be aware of the CTC (95%) compared to Detroiters who speak languages other than English (87%).¹²

Tax Prep Appointments and Returns Completed

From June 2021 to June 2022, residents scheduled 2,380 tax prep appointments on the **Get the Tax Facts website**, at a web traffic conversion rate of 1.78%. In the first half of 2022, 982 individuals made tax prep appointments online, at a slightly lower conversion rate of 1.22%. Some of the steering committee members expressed disappointment in these figures given the time and resources invested by the campaign. However, this data may undercount the overall number of appointments attributable to the campaign, since some unknown number of the 100,000+ visitors to Get the Tax Facts website may have ultimately filed their taxes with a paid preparer or used United Way's My Free Taxes tool rather than schedule VITA appointments. Separately, we do not know what proportion of these appointments represent people who typically do not file their taxes—a key target audience of this campaign—versus regular filers who simply learned about VITA services through the campaign.

Using the above appointment data, **we estimate that the Detroit Child Tax Credit campaign resulted in at least 1,184 federal tax returns filed with VITA providers, which totals to at least \$6.5 million in Child Tax Credits issued to Detroit families.** This estimate should be treated with significant caution, given the number of assumptions we make to arrive at this figure:

- First, our estimate leverages Accounting Aid Society (AAS) data from 2022 showing that 50% of scheduled appointments in which the filer learned about AAS through campaign sources resulted in a tax return filed. If we assume the same rate for 2021 AAS appointments, plus all appointments scheduled with Wayne Metro (2,380 appointments in total), this suggests the Detroit Child Tax Credit campaign resulted in 1,184 federal tax returns filed.
- We estimated the dollar amount in child tax credits as follows: we multiplied 1,184 returns by the appropriate expanded Child Tax Credit amounts (\$3,000 and \$3,600), according to both the proportion of children in Detroit under 6 versus 6 to 17, and the proportion of families with one, two, and three or more dependents claimed on Detroit tax returns.¹³

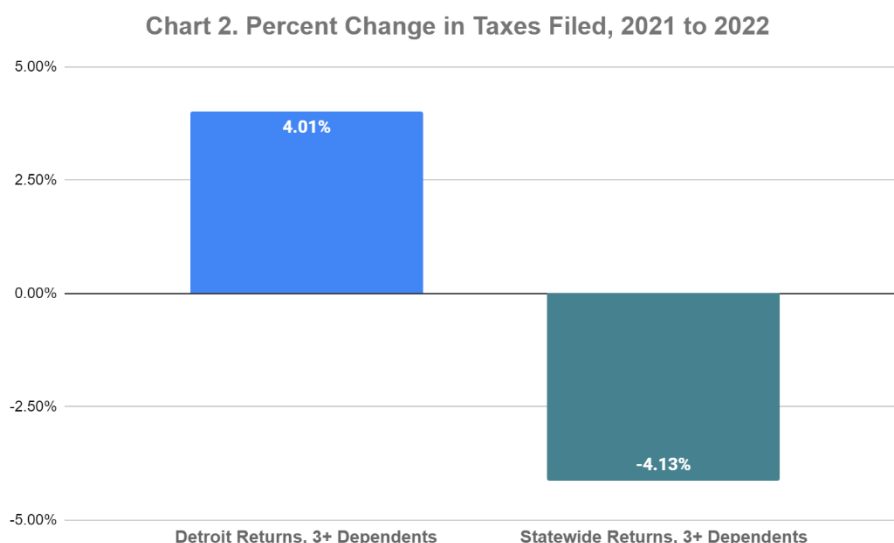
The first limitation to this approach overcounts credit dollars, since some filers may not have qualified for the child tax credit. The second limitation to this approach undercounts credit dollars, since we do not know the proportion of families with four, five or six children who have filed taxes, and therefore only count credit dollars for the first three children.

The above data highlights the number of Detroit returns filed with VITA providers originating from the campaign website. Michigan Treasury data, which includes returns filed by Detroiters

using all methods, including self-filing, paid preparers and VITA sites, suggests solid returns from the Detroit Child Tax Credit campaign's efforts.

Between 2021 and 2022, there was a statewide drop in the number of returns filed by taxpayers with dependents (5.7%), yet the decline in Detroit was smaller (3.8%).^{vi} This information allows us to consider a counterfactual: without campaign efforts, the decline in Detroit returns might have mirrored the statewide trend, resulting in an estimated 2,300 fewer tax returns filed than were actually observed, at a loss of an estimated \$12 million in child tax credits.

Between 2021 and 2022, the number of Detroit families with three or more dependents who filed taxes increased by 4%. Yet during the same period statewide, the number of families with three or more dependents who filed taxes decreased by 4% (Chart 2). Perhaps Detroit's larger families, who qualified for at least \$9,000 in credits, were particularly receptive to campaign messages which emphasized that CTC recipients could receive thousands of dollars in tax credits.



Qualitative data provided by community outreach partners highlights important individual-level outcomes of the campaign. In an interview, Debbie Fisher from HOPE Village Revitalization shared one story:

We've had at least 30 neighborhood residents connect to resources through [the CTC] effort. One person who didn't know she was eligible for the Child Tax Credit and couldn't figure out how to navigate the process connected with our neighborhood resource navigator and applied for two years' worth of credits she hadn't received. She got more than \$17,000 for her family. She was ecstatic that she would be able to get her car fixed,

^{vi} To some degree, Detroit Metro Area Communities Study data also suggests a decline in taxes filed between 2021 and 2022. When surveyed in summer 2021, 18% of households said they had not filed taxes, but due to the way the question was asked, the true proportion was likely closer to 19%. The two surveys collected after the campaign began, in November-December 2021 and July-August 2022, showed a slightly higher non-filing rate of 21%.

and she had a long list of things she would be able to do that she wouldn't have been able to do otherwise.

Erica Mixon from Central Detroit Christian CDC described one of her more complicated cases that resulted in a positive outcome:

I had a young lady, she received Social Security. She is a single mother, and sometimes struggles with the heaviness of taking care of the family. When I was able to engage with her, it took for me to literally go out, pick her up, take her to Wayne Metro, and keep encouraging her that this is something that you're entitled to. And then after we got through those hoops, Dad had already claimed the children. So then, Wayne Metro kind of took over and told her the things that she needed to do to rectify it...The IRS got involved too...But in the end, I saw her about a month ago in the lobby. And I asked her, did she ever get a refund for this year? And she did.

Community partners also explained the challenges of comprehensively capturing these outcomes. Most partners shared stories about instances where they told someone about the credit but were not able to make an appointment on the spot. "Sometimes...you'll talk to 'em and they won't do it then, but then they'll do it later or they'll tell a friend and that friend never would've done it if they didn't [hear about it from you]. Those kinds of things are hard to track," said one partner. Some parents told partners they felt more comfortable making tax preparation appointments on their own. Perhaps this reflects the fact that many see tax-related issues as private, or perhaps these parents simply felt they didn't have time to schedule an appointment on the spot.

Data from Congress of Communities, the only organization able to track individual-level outcomes regularly,^{vii} shows that **phone banking may be the most effective outreach method to generate tax prep appointments**. Congress of Communities staff called 209 residents who were affiliated with the organization and made 33 appointments, at a yield rate of 16%. "These are people who know us, it's not a cold call," said the CoC staff member. "It just takes a lot of time and effort to get appointments done." At community events, Congress of Communities reported a yield rate of 2-10%. Overall, CoC made 51 tax prep appointments for residents. Of course, appointments do not always result in returns, so we do not know how many returns were filed from the above yield rate.

According to community outreach partners, tabling at community events was another winning strategy to schedule appointments. The partners found parent-targeted events, such as parent-teacher conferences, to be most productive, as well as events with resource tables, such as MACC Development's Show Me the Money Day. Hope Village tabled at their local library branch and had to deploy some trial and error to determine the best time to reach families, but the organization was eventually able to sign up some individuals for appointments. Tabling at grocery store events was a less effective strategy, since presumably individuals were not at

^{vii} During the summer 2021 outreach season, most groups expressed hesitancy in tracking individual conversations and appointments made. Therefore, this year, the community partners were not required to track individual outcomes of their conversations with residents.

those locations to learn about social services. Adequate staffing was often another barrier to effectively implementing a tabling strategy. An effective tabling event requires at least two staff members, one to introduce themselves and discuss the credit with families and another to sign interested individuals for appointments; this was not always possible for our community outreach partners.

CAMPAIGN PARTNER PERSPECTIVES

In the previous sections, we explained the Detroit Child Tax Credit campaign's major activities, and outlined the available evidence of its effectiveness at increasing awareness of the CTC and encouraging families to take action to receive their payments. Here, we explore campaign partners' reflections on their own participation in the campaign, as well as overall campaign strengths, challenges, and lessons learned. The following insights were gathered from interviews Poverty Solutions conducted in spring 2022 with seven steering committee members and five community outreach partners who received campaign funding.

Campaign Strengths

Centralizing and streamlining efforts: The campaign created a centralized hub for information and action to promote the Child Tax Credit, which minimized duplication of efforts or gaps in knowledge- sharing. "It brought together our EITC coalition with the community development infrastructure and it also looped in the early childhood parent support network infrastructure in ways that have never been brought together before," said one steering committee member. This work also expanded the number of community partners who were aware of tax credit benefits, and the importance of promoting expert, free tax preparation services offered by VITA as a tool to access those benefits. Going forward, local stakeholders can also use these campaign tactics to spread messages about other important social service programs and benefits.

Detroit has a robust infrastructure of community organizations and agencies that work to disseminate messages to residents, but there is no simple method to activate this infrastructure. The Child Tax Credit campaign coalition took on the important, time-intensive work of reaching out to these contacts and requesting that they share messages about the credit with their constituents. "Somebody has to invest the time in relationship building to have a meeting with this person...oftentimes emails don't get you there," said one steering committee member leading this work. "You have to get someone on the phone so that they can fully understand what you're trying to do, and sort of brainstorm with them. What are the ways in which this organization could contribute?"

Supporting community partners: The funded partners generally felt they had the right resources and information to spread messages about the Child Tax Credit, including flyers, trainings, and access to experts who could answer technical questions. These partners were well-positioned to support other community leaders by being visible and knowledgeable about the CTC. After stuffing diaper bags with flyers at the diaper bank, Erica Mixon from Central Detroit Christian CDC got a call from the bank's director who said a mother needed help with her taxes. Erica was ultimately able to help her make an appointment with Accounting Aid Society and get her taxes done. Though staff at funded partner organizations developed solid

knowledge of the credit, some wished they had tax experts on site at community events to answer in depth questions, although that was not possible given tax prep provider capacity.

Local voices, local messaging: The local Detroit tax credit campaign leveraged community organizations to spread the word about the credit, including Michigan-specific tax information, in ways that national mobilizing efforts did not. In Michigan, households are eligible for some state tax credits that are only accessible by filing a full tax return; to maximize tax benefits flowing to families, Detroit's campaign emphasized filing full tax returns using VITA services, rather than filing simplified tax returns using the non-filer portal. Some national campaigns gave information about simplified and full tax filing equal billing, and only recently shifted to clearer information about each approach's respective benefits.

Campaign Challenges

Quantifying impact of community outreach: It's difficult to measure the impact of the community outreach partners' work, since most were not able to report how many individuals they spoke with or helped to arrange tax prep appointments. Among partners who did track the number of appointments made, they did not have the capacity to follow up with residents to determine whether they kept appointments and received a tax return.

Finding non-filers: It was not possible to use precise data to find the ~9,000 non-filer households in Detroit. IRS data on the proportion of non-filers locally was only available at the zip code level, and our attempts to further estimate non-filers by identifying which Census tracts had the most households with very low incomes did not provide enough detail to meaningfully inform outreach. Unsurprisingly, partners reported that most families they spoke with had already filed taxes and did not need help setting up appointments.

Appointment issues: Community outreach partners reported a few challenges with scheduling tax prep appointments. First, some noted that there were no appointments available around tax time. Though tax prep providers had more resources than in typical years due to support from the campaign, providers had a finite number of slots, particularly around tax time. Second, the online appointment scheduler on the Get the Tax Facts site did not offer an option to schedule an appointment with a Spanish-speaking volunteer, since AAS could not guarantee in advance that a Spanish-speaking volunteer would be present for a given appointment, although in practice Spanish-language services are provided "day of" at the Southwest Detroit site.

In interviews, both tax prep providers reported a high incidence of appointment no-shows and appointments that did not result in a successful tax return. According to Accounting Aid Society data, 50% of appointments where the resident indicated they heard about AAS from campaign sources resulted in a completed tax return, compared to 68% of appointments where AAS itself was the source. This disparity may be due to the fact that many residents who schedule their appointments directly with Accounting Aid are returning customers, who have had past positive experience with AAS' brand and services. The providers also noted that many residents made appointments not to have their taxes prepared, but instead to ask a question of a tax preparer. Thus, both tax preparers felt that the campaign resulted in a higher volume of appointments that did not result in a return. "The challenging thing for me running the program is that a lot of those were no shows, which means they were appointments reserved that couldn't have an

outcome because nobody ever walked through the door. So it's basically a wasted time slot," said one provider.

Lessons Learned

Community organizations had different capacity levels: Some groups had more ability to try new outreach tactics than others, according to the steering committee member who was responsible for working with community groups. She said, "One group I remember made their own QR code...She came up with an idea and she did it on her own. But other groups where it's like two people working on staff, they'd be like, oh yeah, that's a great idea. But they have no idea how to set any of that up. And they don't have a lot of staff." Similarly, some organizations were able to track individual conversations and make tax prep appointments at in-person events, but others were not well-positioned to do so.

Secure additional capacity to help residents navigate barriers: We found that outreach partners did not have the capacity to help residents navigate instrumental barriers to filing their taxes, such as help with ID, custody issues, or transportation. Each partner spent the bulk of their campaign time doing outreach, which left little time for barrier-busting. Going forward, **the campaign could benefit from a dedicated staff member to provide more in-depth services to residents** dealing with these more complex issues. One steering committee member said, "I think where we need to go next is like really in a human centered way, understanding what are those barriers that are preventing people from filing taxes and thinking big and creatively about what's in our power to address those barriers. And how do we set up an infrastructure that will effectively address those barriers?"

More collaboration: Some steering committee members said they would have liked a more collaborative approach to campaign meetings and campaign decision-making. One partner said that at times, it felt as if decisions were made offline then brought to the group for approval, or after steps had already been taken to execute on those decisions, rather than based on a shared planning process. In contrast to a more deliberative approach, one member said, "The feeling in steering committee meetings sometimes is more like, this is the problem. Now raise your hand and come up with the answer."

Some organizations wanted more direction for outreach: Originally, community outreach organizations were encouraged to identify and execute their own outreach strategies, but several groups sought more direction on outreach tactics. This year, the campaign offered a menu of outreach and engagement activities to the groups, such as "send text messages to your constituent list," or "table at a high traffic location." The community group liaison explained the stance of some partners on this: "[Partner A] said 'I would prefer a, you know, a top down [outreach] strategy.'...Maybe it seems like more work to have to...come up with the work and *perform* the work, maybe it just seems like it's almost like another burden to do that." Although it may seem counterintuitive for intermediaries like CDAD and United Way to prescribe outreach strategies to community organizations, some of the community outreach partners seemed to prefer that approach.

Use incentives to draw in families: Several groups mentioned that having pens, snacks or other goodies to give away provided a draw to encourage parents to patronize their table. The community partners also concluded that it made sense to **talk about the CTC alongside other**

messages about financial services or civic issues. One community partner said, “I don’t know if you would draw people just to come to talk about CTC. But if you’re talking about property tax, if you’re talking about home purchasing, where you say ‘Hey, by the way, the way to increase your net income is through getting your tax credits,’ well, that catches their attention.”

Start earlier, end later: Several groups cited the need to **start outreach earlier**, to catch residents before they went to a private preparer. “We were unable to start outreach until March [2022], and therefore we missed several people who had already paid to get their taxes done by a private company. We had several people, especially our regular program participants, say to us that they wished they would have known sooner so they didn’t spend the hundreds of dollars on a private tax preparation company.” Similarly, one group mentioned the need to continue outreach past the tax filing deadline, which the campaign is currently doing.

Continuing education: Community partners spent a significant amount of time explaining the CTC and debunking myths around filing taxes. Some felt they needed a person from one of the tax providers on-site at community events to answer questions. “There is an **observed stigma in our community around taxes**, IRS, and engagement with government funded programs. In the future, we believe it would be beneficial to offer a seminar session about general tax preparation,” according to one partner. Perhaps a seminar could take the form of a YouTube or TikTok series, or be offered as a component of a larger workshop (e.g. homeownership, entrepreneurship).

From the tax prep providers’ perspective, the best place to teach residents is at the tax prep site, when residents are getting their taxes done and are asking specific questions about their tax situations to the volunteer. “I think that this past year has really highlighted that the education piece happens at the tax site,” said one tax prep leader. “The person that is working on the tax return is the trusted resource.” Perhaps, then, the goal of community education isn’t for residents to understand the ins and outs of tax credits available to them, but to understand that they may be eligible for an important financial opportunity, and there is expert help available to them at VITA sites.

CONCLUSION

Going forward, the Detroit Child Tax Credit campaign will shift into a coalition focused on encouraging Detroiters to file their taxes, without a specific focus on the CTC. In addition to continued work addressing barriers to filing, the campaign should continue to share messages and provide communications support to trusted community organizations, funded and otherwise; these groups engage with families across Detroit every day and must have access to timely, accurate, and actionable information to spread to their networks. Overall, we hope the organizers will leverage these evaluation findings in the spirit of continuous improvement, given the urgency of increasing family income across Detroit.

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² Cooper, K., Stewart, K. (2021). Does Household Income Affect Children’s Outcomes? A Systematic Review of the Evidence. *Child Indicators Research*. 14, 981-1005.

³ Data calculates the number of children who were not claimed on a 2019 or 2020 tax return but have publicly funded health insurance, which means their families fall under the income eligibility threshold for the Child Tax Credit.

Source: U.S. Department of Treasury (June 2021). *By ZIP Code: Number of Children under Age 18 with a Social Security Number Who Are Not Found on a Tax Year 2019 or 2020 Tax Return but who Appear on a Tax Year 2019 Form 1095 and Associated Number of Policy Holders*. <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/131/Estimated-Counts-of-Children-Unclaimed-for-CTC-by-ZIP-Code-2019.pdf>

⁴ Detroit Metropolitan Area Communities Study. (2022). DMACS Wave 14 Toplines – November 3- December 15, 2021. <https://detroitssurvey.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/DMACS-Wave-14-Toplines-1-19-22.pdf>

⁵ Detroit Metropolitan Area Communities Study. (2017). Survey #2 – Winter 2017. <https://detroitssurvey.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Topline-Wave-2-Winter-2017.pdf>;

Detroit Metropolitan Area Communities Study. (2021). DMACS Wave 13 Toplines – June 2-July 9, 2021. <https://detroitssurvey.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/DMACS-Wave-13-Toplines.pdf>;

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⁶ Detroit Metropolitan Area Communities Study. (2021). DMACS Wave 13 Toplines.

⁷ Lopez, W., Kling, K. (2021). The Child Tax Credit: Findings from the Barriers to Benefits Study. Unpublished research memo.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Zucker, G., Wagner, L. (2021). Talking to Non-Filers. New America Practice Lab. <https://www.newamerica.org/new-practice-lab/blog/talking-to-non-filers/>; Lopez, W. & Kling, K. (2021).

¹⁰ Poverty Solutions analysis of DMACS Wave 14 data. Toplines – November 3- December 15, 2021. <https://detroitssurvey.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/DMACS-Wave-14-Toplines-1-19-22.pdf>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Based on data provided to Poverty Solutions by the Office of Revenue and Tax Analysis, Michigan Department of Treasury.