

AGENCY HELPS WITH TAXES

Emmaline Epperson

Hillsdale's Community Action Agency helped local residents receive more than \$750,000 back from income taxes last year. They hope to help members of the community get even more back this year.

The agency's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program helps citizens who make less than \$50,000 annually. Most are either young parents or senior citizens. "I often end my interviews with 'Do you need food?'" said Kristin Lucas, who has volunteered with the program for three years.

VITA, organized by the IRS, offers assistance nationwide. In Hillsdale, members of the community and college students take a class to get certified and then volunteer from January to April. Those who use VITA make an appointment at the Community Action Agency. They're required to bring I.D., their social security card, W-2 forms, and any documentation for social services, and then to fill out a six page interview form.

"Many people think that what we do is common sense. It's not rocket science, but it feels like it some days," Lucas said. On an average day, she can do about six or seven sets of taxes. February is the busiest month, she said. "I really like doing taxes and I like helping people," Lucas said. Senior Joe Viviano, head of Hillsdale College's Accounting club, organizes the Hillsdale students that volunteer at VITA. Michael Sweeney, professor of accounting, helped Viviano start the program. If students volunteer for 60 hours, they can earn one credit hour. The program is available to all students. Viviano said he plans to apply to accounting firms after he graduates and hopes that VITA will help him gain experience dealing with taxes.

Those who seek aid from VITA are people who would not generally file their taxes, said Maxine Vanlerberg, the program director. She has found that people underestimate the benefits available from filing their taxes. People may receive credits that can be used for home heating, property tax payments, or earned income tax credit. "We had one woman last week who is homeless and has not filed taxes for the past three years," Vanlerberg said. "She might get a couple thousand dollars back. We might help her get back on her feet."