

## Opportunities for Accountants to Shine: Foundation Communities

By Derrick Bonyuet, PhD, CFA, CFP, CPA

I often tell my colleagues how fortunate accountants are as we can use our skills in different organizations in a variety of roles. This is why I believe accountants are in a good position to give back and support the community. There are also many organizations where accountants can put their skills in use and shine in different ways. One of this organization is Foundation Communities, which is based in Central Texas and offers numerous programs all aimed to support the community.

On this regard, we have reached out Miller Wilbourn who serves as the Volunteer Engagement Manager at Foundation Communities (FC) to get an overview of what this organization does and how accountants can help.

**Derrick: Miller, please tell me about Foundation Communities?**

**Miller:** Foundation Communities is a nonprofit that provides affordable, attractive homes and free support services for thousands of families and individuals—including our residents as well as the broader community. We own and operate 27 apartment communities, with 24 in Austin and 3 more in North Texas.

**Derrick: What programs does FC offer where you think accountants can provide a valuable service?**

**Miller:** While we are known best as a provider of affordable housing, our support services provide opportunities for thousands of volunteers to participate in our mission each year. Three of our volunteer programs stand out as especially good matches for anyone with a background in accounting: Tax Help, Health Coverage, and Financial Coaching.

If you're an accountant and you'd like to get away from the numbers for a while, we'd also love your help in programs that support education, housing, and health. [Read more here](#) about where you can get involved.

**Derrick: Tell me more about these programs? What is the impact to the community? Any special requirement to volunteer in these programs?**

**Miller:** First and foremost is Tax Help, a program we run in partnership with the IRS's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. Our volunteers work with clients to provide free, professional, and accurate tax preparation. Our volunteers call it their most fulfilling volunteer opportunity and many of our clients rely on tax refunds for as much as a third of their annual income. By ensuring that all eligible taxpayers claim the Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, and others, our volunteers work to reduce child poverty and increase income for our clients.

During the 2023 tax season, our program prepared almost 14,000 tax returns and generated \$21.6 million in refunds for the community. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which is not claimed by 20%

of taxpayers who are eligible nationwide, accounted for approximately \$7 million of refunds for our clients. We see this as one of the most important functions of our program—making sure that our clients claim every dollar in credits for which they are eligible. The Child Tax Credit (CTC) is another important credit for our clients, and it accounted for \$9 million in refunds. Another priority for our Tax Help program is helping our clients save. In 2023, 1,200+ clients saved \$2 million from their refunds.



If you're interested in volunteering, [click this link](#) to sign up and I'll make sure to get you all the info you need to get started. No prior experience with tax preparation is required, and we provide all the training you need. We ask volunteers to give roughly one 3-hour shift per week throughout tax season, which comes out to about 30 hours during the season. CPAs and other accounting professionals are also eligible for certain Continuing Education credits for volunteering—reach out to me at [Miller.Wilbourn@foundcom.org](mailto:Miller.Wilbourn@foundcom.org) with any questions.

Second is our Health Coverage program. Volunteers meet one-on-one with neighbors across Austin to access the healthcare they need and deserve. Every year our dedicated volunteers assist thousands of Austinites secure affordable health insurance. Helping folks access healthcare gives them peace of mind for their health and future. This is a great opportunity to develop a comprehensive understanding of health policy and most importantly, a meaningful way to make a direct impact on your neighbors. Just like with Tax Help, you don't need any experience to volunteer—we'll make sure you have all the training you need.

In 2022, the Health Coverage program enrolled over 4,300 clients in health insurance plans and secured \$26.4 million in financial assistances via premium tax credits. 120 volunteers gave over 1900 hours of their time over six weeks of the Open Enrollment season to make this work possible.

Volunteer opportunities are available from November 1<sup>st</sup> to December 15<sup>th</sup> each year, and we ask volunteers to give about 15 hours of their time during the volunteer season. If you'd like to join the volunteer team, [sign up here](#) and we'll get you started.

Last is Financial Coaching. Our Financial Coaching volunteers meet with community members who are pursuing a variety of financial goals. Coaches provide resources and encouragement as the clients create and manage budgets, reduce debt, and boost credit. In 2022, financial coaching volunteers met with 635 clients, and 85% improved their credit scores. Additionally, 73% of clients made substantial progress toward financial goals such as savings, debt reduction, budgeting, and credit.

Financial Coaching is our smallest program, and we typically only recruit volunteers at the beginning of the summer each year. We ask that volunteers serve 30 hours over the course of one year. If you're interested, [sign up here](#) and I'll make sure we contact you when we're ready to recruit in 2024.

**Derrick: Miller, tell us more about your role at FC? What's your background?**

**Miller:** I work on The Corporate and Volunteer Engagement Team at Foundation Communities as the Volunteer Engagement Manager for the three programs I've described before. I manage a small team to recruit volunteers, facilitate their training for each program, and ensure their experience is as fruitful as possible. Basically it's my job to get volunteers in the door and make sure they enjoy their time with us and keep coming back.

My background is actually not anywhere close to taxes, health insurance, or personal finance. I studied English and Classics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and finished an MA in English Literature at University of Texas at Austin in 2021. You really don't need to have any special background or skills to join the volunteer team—you just need to care about your community and set aside some time to help.

**Derrick: What would you recommend anybody who wants to support FC?**

**Miller:** For anyone who wants to support Foundation Communities with their time and skills, I would recommend signing up for a specific opportunity linked above, filling out an interest form at the bottom of [this page](#) on our website, or emailing me at [Miller.Wilbourn@foundcom.org](mailto:Miller.Wilbourn@foundcom.org). We would also appreciate your financial support, and you can [donate online](#) on our website to help make our community a more supportive, affordable place to live.

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