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ACCS offers free financial program

Attention all Advantage CCS clients who live in Allegheny County, outside of the city of Pittsburgh: The Agency has an exciting opportunity to help you take better control of your finances!

Would you like to start saving more money or set new savings goals? Do you want help understanding your credit report and learn your credit score? Would you like to learn more money management tips? Do you want to check in with an Agency counselor and review your budget? If you answered yes to any of these questions then the new program **Taking Control of Your Finances** is for you.

Taking Control of Your Finances is a free financial literacy program for any income-eligible resident of Allegheny County (outside of the City of Pittsburgh). The program consists of three counseling sessions:

- A budget and credit counseling session assessing your current financial situation.
- A credit report review session to help you understand your credit report and learn your credit score.
- A follow-up credit counseling and budget session to talk to a counselor about any questions you may have and to discuss future financial goals.

The program also includes a 2-hour financial management class that you can complete online or in person at the agency's South Side office.

All program services are free and funded by a Community Services Block Grant through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act. If you want more information about the program or want to register call 412-390-1300 ext. 114.

Tips

If you are one of the millions of Americans who still owe Uncle Sam money, or if you are receiving refund and want to know how to use it wisely, read on for some great tips.

Getting a refund?

Open an emergency savings account. This will allow you to use cash for unplanned expenses.

If you plan to pay off debt with your refund, pay off the debts that have the highest interest rates first.

Will you owe money?

Research payment options, including a bank loan and IRS installment plans. Make sure you can live with the repayment terms before you sign. Otherwise, you could incur penalties and late fees.

Change federal withholding. Many people with large tax bills simply didn't withhold enough from their paychecks during the year. Still, others sold stock and failed to budget for the capital gains tax. Correct both scenarios and avoid similar problems next year.



Q: We are a military family and like many others, have found ourselves struggling with our bills. Are there any programs that can help us?

A: The Soldiers and Sailors Civil Relief Act can help you in many ways. It can reduce interest payments on mortgages and credit card debt, and it caps the interest rates that can be charged at 6 percent. It provides protection from eviction if your rent is \$1,200 or less. It can also delay all civil court actions including bankruptcy, foreclosure, and divorce proceedings. Remember, these provisions are not automatically put in place; you must inform the creditor of your military status in writing in order to receive them.

Another great program is Military One Source. This program applies to all branches of the military, and covers almost any issue you might be having. You can use it for anything from finding a plumber in the middle of the night to getting help with your financial needs. The phones for Military One Source are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Through this program we offer general financial counseling, pre-purchase and post-purchase counseling, foreclosure prevention, reverse mortgage/HECM counseling and bankruptcy counseling and education. All services involved with Military One Source have no charge.

(888) 511-2227

Plan ahead to save money on vacation

The winter weather will soon be gone for the year, and many people are starting to get into vacation mode.

Chances are good that you've already booked your summer vacation or are firming up your plans. But, even if you've got a place to stay and your drive mapped out, that doesn't mean that you're necessarily done planning.

The money you spend while you're on vacation can add up pretty quickly between food and entertainment. If you plan ahead for all of your expenses, you can save money once you get to your vacation and destination. And nothing could be more relaxing than knowing you've got your budget under control.

Buy your staple items at home. Stores in tourist areas tend to charge a lot more for everything, including food and toiletries. Figure out what types of non-perishable items you're likely to use every day, like coffee and coffee filters, and get them ahead of time. If you are traveling with a group of people, make a list of everything you need to get before you leave and divide it up.

If you will have access to a kitchen, use it! Cooking your meals at home saves money, and this can be especially true on a vacation. Plan out some meals before you leave. Add the non-perishable items to your pre-vacation shopping list. Once you're at your destination, you'll only have to buy some things.

Make use of coupons. If you know you're going to buy some grocery items while you're on vacation, clip coupons for what you'll need.

If you're planning to dine out,

budget ahead for any meals you plan to eat at restaurants. Most restaurants have web sites. Take some time to check them out and consider the menu prices. There's nothing worse than sitting down with a menu and getting a shock when you realize the cheapest entrée is \$22.

Look for coupons to the local restaurants. Sometimes hotels and beach homes will have guidebooks that include coupons or special offers for vacationers. These books can also supply you with information about local eateries. Some places even have deals where kids eat free. If you're traveling with little ones, this can be a huge money saver.

If you plan on going to amusement parks, zoos, aquariums, etc., on vacation, check to see if they offer any days with free or reduced rates. Likewise, find out if attractions offer discounts for being a member of a club, like AAA.

As far as travel part of the trip, you can save money by planning ahead as well.

Whether you're flying or driving, be sure to pack plenty of healthy, filling snacks like granola, fiber bars and dried fruit. Also make sure to pack bottled water. For an even more cost effective way to get your fluids, bring along reusable water bottles.

If you're driving, pack lunch or dinner in a cooler to avoid expensive meal stops along the way.

Be as creative as you can when it comes to saving money on vacation. With a little thought and planning you can have a great time without busting your budget.

Feedback

What would you like to see in *The Advantage Advisor*? Do you have a question for the Debt Monkey? We would love to hear from you.

Send feedback to Kristen Garrett, Advantage CCS, 2403 Sidney St., Pittsburgh, PA 15203 or e-mail to kgarrett@advantageccs.org.

Resources

If you have questions about filing your income taxes, you can start by contacting the Internal Revenue Service.

You can go to www.irs.gov and get information about practically everything you need to know about filing your taxes including using the free e-file and the earned income tax credit (EITC), which is a refundable tax credit for filers who meet certain eligibility guidelines. The IRS has expanded the eligibility guidelines for the EITC.

There are taxpayer clinics set up around the country to help low-income filers who need professional assistance. A map of the clinics can be found online.

You can also call the IRS hotline at **(800) 829-1040** for answers to your tax time questions.

Advantage

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