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**FOR RELEASE AT WILL**

February 2021

**LATEST LEGAL SERVICES NEWSLETTER FOCUSES ON 2020 FEDERAL INCOME TAX RETURNS AND THE GROWTH OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

EDISON — Details for low- and moderate-income New Jerseyans about filing federal income tax returns for 2020, as well as a focus on the growing problem of human trafficking in the Garden State are among the major articles in the latest newsletter of Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ).

The bilingual publication, “Looking Out For Your Legal Rights,” is accessible online at [www.lsnjlaw.org](http://www.lsnjlaw.org).

The article on federal income taxes is particularly timely since the April 15 filing deadline is fast approaching. Similarly, human trafficking made headlines in New Jersey this month when the Bergen County Prosecutor’s Office charged 22 people with running an international human trafficking ring that for five years lured at least 50 women from a small village in Mexico to New Jersey with promises of employment and then forced them into prostitution.

The newsletter stresses that even though many people may have had incomes last year below the threshold required for filing a tax return, they still may want to file by the April 15 deadline because they could still qualify for a refund or some other financial benefits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The newsletter includes a chart people can use to determine if they are required to file a return.

Another point underscored in the publication is that people with incomes under \$57,000 should avoid going to paid tax preparers because they can get such help free from two sources: Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) or Tax Counseling for the Elderly (TCE) by calling 1-800-906-9887 or going to <https://irs.treasury.gov/freetaxprep>.

Additionally, anyone with adjusted gross incomes under \$72,000 can qualify for commercial tax preparation software and have their returns prepared and filed at no cost. Details can be found at [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov) and clicking the Free File link.

The newsletter further notes people anticipating refunds should steer away from firms that offer instant cash in advance of the refunds — actual loans from which fees and interest are deducted.

The publication explains the meaning of such terms as filing status, standard deductions or itemized deductions, tax credits and other key aspects of income tax returns, including the availability of six-month filing extensions if sought before the April 15 deadline.

Meanwhile, individuals who need help with tax issues may financially qualify for assistance from LSNJ's Tax Legal Assistance Project (TLAP) by calling 1-888-576-5774 or applying online at [www.lsnjlawhotline.org](http://www.lsnjlawhotline.org). New Jerseyans who were eligible but did not receive the first or second Covid-19 stimulus payments will be able to claim the federal economic impact payments when they file their income taxes this year. That, though, is contingent on a tax return being filed.

The newsletter offers what amounts to a detailed tutorial on human trafficking, noting that “despite widespread misconceptions, human trafficking is occurring at high rates not only in the United States, but right here in New Jersey.” Ironically, victims for a variety of reasons often don't realize or acknowledge it is happening to them.

The newsletter piece poses a series of probing questions that may help people realize they have been victims. It provides advice on whom to contact when sex or labor trafficking is suspected, including the National Human Services Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or the New Jersey Human Trafficking Hotline at 855-363-6548. Also, a year ago LSNJ launched PROTECT to provide a holistic approach in offering legal and social services to trafficking victims. PROTECT can be reached at 1-844-576-5776.

Depending upon the circumstances, trafficking victims may qualify for financial assistance from the state's Victims of Crime Compensation Office.

So how prevalent is trafficking and what motivates the traffickers? As the article puts it, “After the drug trade, it is considered the most lucrative crime.”

Another article in the publication deals with the electronic filing system the state courts have set up for expunging records of certain past offenses. In that regard, LSNJ's eligibility tools

and resources, known as Clearing Your Record Online or CYRO, are available at [www.lsnjlaw.org](http://www.lsnjlaw.org).

*Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ), located in Edison, heads the state's Legal Services system, a network of six independent non-profit corporations and has been providing free essential legal aid in civil matters to low-income people through offices in all 21 counties for more than 50 years. Since its inception, LSNJ has provided representation in more than 2.6 million cases.*

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