

## COALITION HELPED LOW-INCOME FAMILIES RECEIVE \$28M IN TAX REFUNDS, CREDITS

BY ANDREA LOPEZ-VILLAFANA

### SAN DIEGO

Many years ago, Mari-cruz Peraza-Aranda helped prepare taxes for low-income farmworkers in Imperial Valley as a volunteer for a free tax preparation program.

But last March, the substitute teacher lost hours of work and income as schools closed due to the pandemic, and Peraza-Aranda, a single mother of four, realized she would need help filing her taxes this year. She turned to a coalition of local groups and agencies that provide free tax preparation in San Diego County.

The groups, known as the Earned Income Tax Credit Coalition, announced recently that, despite some setbacks and challenges related to COVID-19, the coalition helped thousands of San Diego households receive more than \$28 million in federal and state tax refunds.

The coalition is led by the

United Way of San Diego County in partnership with the county's Health and Human Services Agency, 2-1-1 San Diego, and 20 organizations across the region.

Because of the pandemic the groups couldn't host large events, and in-person tax preparation was limited, so the coalition had to switch to online services. And there were state budget cuts, which also limited the number of appointments available to people, said Nancy Sasaki, president and CEO of United Way of San Diego County.

The coalition completed more than 29,800 tax returns in San Diego, coalition members said. More than 3,800 filers received more than \$6.9 million through the federal government's Earned Income Tax Credit, a program that gives low-to-moderate-income households a refund or a reduction in taxes.

More than 5,000 filers also received more than \$990,000 from the state's tax credit program, and more than 3,200 filers claimed more

than \$6 million through a tax credit for families with children under the age of 6.

The amount families can get through a tax credit varies based on a person's income, marital status and dependents.

Sasaki said that because of the pandemic many people who don't normally live paycheck to paycheck found themselves trying to make ends meet.

"Being able to have free tax preparation assistance that we offer throughout the county was such a huge benefit for them," Sasaki said. "Low- and moderate-income families need that money. Sometimes it could average \$2,000 to \$3,000 that they receive ... so that really helps put food on the table, pay the bills, maybe help pay the rent."

Families can still file for the 2020 tax year and can make an appointment at a tax preparation location in the county by calling 2-1-1.

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## READY FOR FOREVER HOMES



KRISTIAN CARREON

Luke (left) and Sunny are just a few of the dogs up for adoption at the San Diego Humane Society during National Dog Day on Thursday.

## SMOLENS

FROM B1

An Associated Press headline summarized it: "Audit: California agency bungled COVID-19 funds for homeless."

Amid the criticism from rivals, Newsom has highlighted positive aspects of his record since his election in 2018, especially budget spending that expands health care, preschool and programs to help people who are homeless.

Mostly, he's gone on the attack, particularly against Elder. Newsom and the anti-recall campaign say the radio talk show host's opposition to gun control and a minimum wage (he says it should be zero) and Elder's derisive views on women, particularly in the workplace, are anathema to the vast majority of Californians. Elder has called abortion "murder."

But California recalls are a unique political process in which a majority must vote

to oust the governor, but the candidate with the most votes — which could be a small plurality — replaces him if the recall is successful. At the moment, that would be Elder, according to several polls.

National news coverage of Elder has amplified his controversial positions and the widely reported accusation by his ex-fiancée that he took out a gun during a heated discussion with her — which he denies — has raised questions about his personal behavior.

Further, Newsom is spending considerable time pointing to the growing COVID-19 crisis in Florida, where DeSantis has fought mask mandates and vaccine verification as infections and hospitalizations surge. Newsom stresses that Elder has pledged to reverse mask and vaccine mandates and contends Elder would send California down a similar path.

Elder and other Republican candidates have backed Trump, which fits into New-

som's overarching claim that the recall is an attempt by the GOP, especially Trump Republicans, to take over heavily Democratic California.

Meanwhile, the state epidemiologist, Dr. Erica Pan, said the surge of the Delta variant of the virus that is straining hospital systems in some regions of California is showing signs of moderating. That's good news for everybody and, politically, for Newsom. But experts said hospitalizations are expected to peak around Labor Day, Sept. 6 — by which time most Californians may have voted in the recall election.

Recall leaders and some Republican officials had hoped to keep the focus on Newsom and urged top GOP replacement candidates to avoid internecine warfare.

To that end, they pressured the California Republican Party — whose leaders seemed to favor Faulconer — not to endorse any replacement candidate out of fear that divisions could

discourage Republicans from voting.

But the notion that candidates might refrain from throwing sharp elbows at each other was wishful thinking.

Faulconer made the first big move during the Aug. 17 debate, lashing out at Elder for his statements about women. Faulconer repeatedly has pledged to support women, particularly those in the workforce. Neither Elder, nor reality TV actor and former Olympian Caitlyn Jenner have participated in any of the debates.

On Thursday, Faulconer announced proposals for fully paid parental leave up to 12 weeks, a child care tax credit and efforts to make state pay more equitable between men and women.

Earlier, Jenner called on Elder to drop out of the race, citing his views on women. Faulconer quickly followed suit. This week, Grenell stepped in and said it is Faulconer who should quit the race.

"It's clear that this recall

election is about the future of California. We need a new direction," Grenell said, according to the California Globe, in a statement picked up by various news organizations.

He said Newsom's "left wing policies" have hurt the state and went on to say "Kevin Faulconer's vision is not a conservative one. Faulconer has been unable to embrace the broad type of change we need. He's a politician at a time when we need bold solutions. Kevin Faulconer should drop out of the race, so a solid conservative can garner enough votes to replace Newsom."

That potentially hurts Faulconer with conservative voters, who are most adamant about booting Newsom out of office. The former mayor courted those voters early on but, by and large, they seem to be favoring Elder. Faulconer in recent weeks sought to broaden his appeal across the spectrum, not just by taking on Elder but explicitly seeking support from Democrats and

independents, as well as Republicans.

Paffrath, who was criticized at the debate by Faulconer for lacking experience, fired back that he has 18 years' experience in real estate that "doesn't include ripping off my city."

While those skirmishes play out, Newsom has his own intraparty struggles. Some Democrats have been critical of his record. In a video released this week, Gloria Romero, former state Senate majority leader, endorsed the recall and backed Elder, citing education issues.

But Newsom's biggest battle isn't with Elder, DeSantis, Romero or any other individual Republican or Democrat.

Polls have shown that the recall election essentially is a toss-up and that a lot of Democrats aren't enthusiastic about voting. Newsom's real fight is to get them engaged.

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## DISTRICT

FROM B1

There was the pay-to-play scandal more than a decade ago in which employees of construction companies and school board members, including some from Sweetwater, were charged after companies wined and dined district leaders in exchange for school building contracts.

And last year, a state audit found that former Sweetwater employees had misrepresented the district's finances when asking their board for employee raises and when presenting information to a bond rating agency. The audit said district had mismanaged its finances, which forced the district to make controversial budget cuts.

Tamayo and Ugarte addressed that issue, saying it's unfair to label all Sweetwater employees as bad just because they're affiliated with the district.

"To say someone has to be disqualified because they come from Sweetwater, that's an issue to me," Tamayo said.

Both Ugarte and Tamayo have history with Sweetwater. Ugarte said she is a Sweetwater teacher of 26 years; she is also organizing chair for Sweetwater's teachers union. Tamayo said he previously worked in the Sweetwater district for 13 years.

Tamayo said he believes Sweetwater's problems were caused by former district leaders. Ugarte said she has seen Fernandez confront Sweetwater leadership and advocate for students.

"Our community in Chula Vista is Sweetwater, and if we want to see a change, we have to work collaboratively," Ugarte said.

Hours before the board's vote, an anonymous group of Chula Vista parents raised concerns about financial and organizational ties between Fernandez and Ugarte, who was elected to the board last fall.

Fernandez contributed \$300 to Ugarte's school board election campaign, according to campaign finance disclosures.

Also, the Sweetwater teachers union's political action committee — which Fernandez chairs — donated \$20,000 to the Chula Vista Educators teachers union political action committee

on Sept. 30. That same day, the Chula Vista union political action committee donated \$20,000 to Ugarte's campaign, according to campaign finance disclosures.

One of the key jobs of a school board is approving contracts with teachers unions, regarding aspects such as pay, working conditions and COVID safety measures.

The anonymous parent group on late Tuesday night called for Ugarte to recuse herself from the board's vote because of the campaign contributions. Ugarte participated and voted in the board member selection.

In an interview with the Union-Tribune before Wednesday's board meeting, Fernandez said it was entirely his decision to apply for the board.

He said he applied largely because he is a parent in the Chula Vista district. In addition to having a fourth-grade son in Chula Vista, he has a high-schooler in Sweetwater who went through Chula Vista.

"There isn't anything more important to me than his education being a quality education, and that is largely why I am going for the appointment," Fernandez said. "There's no ill intentions on behalf of myself as a Sweetwater employee or as a member of the association."

He said he has been careful not to talk to Reyes or anyone on the Chula Vista board before or after submitting his board application.

Fernandez noted that others who applied for the Chula Vista board also have district connections. He said Chula Vista, where he has lived since 2006, is a tight-knit community where everybody knows everybody.

At the start of the meeting, each of the four board members disclosed which board candidates they personally or professionally knew. All of them said they know at least a few of the candidates, and all but Bunker knew most of the candidates.

"It's not uncommon for people to know a board member or know somebody in a district office at either district," Fernandez said. "It's pretty much unavoidable."

The dozen people who applied for the board position included several parents and two school board

candidates who lost in the election last fall: former Chula Vista board member Armando Farias, who is also human resources director at Coronado Unified, and small business owner Douglas Wolf.

One candidate was a former principal of Chula Vista's Sunnyside Elementary School, Robert Cochran, who left the school in March and now serves as director of safety and risk management at La Mesa-Spring Valley School District.

About 20 people gave public comments about the board member selection, and more people asked the board to appoint Cochran than any other candidate. Nobody spoke in support of Fernandez.

In the district survey about the board member selection, respondents rated survey comments about what they wanted to see in the new board member.

Commenters primarily said they want a new board member who would put students first, rather than special interests, such as the teachers union. They also said they don't want another board member affiliated with Sweetwater.

About 80 percent of the people who responded to the survey are parents.

Several parents who gave public comments said the board needs to fix community distrust in the Chula Vista board.

Laura Loza said during the meeting that she and her children, including a son who is in special education, watched and waited last school year while many other districts returned to in-person learning months earlier.

She accused Chula Vista's board of catering to the teachers union in keeping schools closed for that long.

"I'm here to remind you all that unions do not represent the community you have been elected to serve," she told the board.

Rosi Martinez, president of the Chula Vista teachers union, said during the meeting that the survey was not representative of district employees due to the low staff participation. She said many teachers were not aware of the survey.

She said the union's advocacy is about children and the union stands for students.

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