

2015 YEAR-END
Tax guide.



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Tax controversy.

DOWNSIZING AT THE IRS

Recent Congressional budget cuts lead to fewer IRS agents.

Earlier this year, the IRS trimmed its staff by 1,800 tax collectors, resulting in 46,000 fewer office audits conducted annually. Great news, right? Except that the IRS does much more than audit taxpayers. As a result of the cuts, its ability to process returns, answer questions, and solve issues like identity theft is impacted.

IRS Commissioner John Koskinen recently wrote to IRS employees that “this year we are looking at a situation where realistically we have no choice but to do less with less,” acknowledging that, even with greater efficiency, IRS services cannot remain constant with staffing down 10% since 2010.

Taxpayers will see the impact of “less with less” in several ways:

- **Technology improvement delays** — Budget cuts have prevented the IRS from updating computer systems and acquiring new equipment at a time when data breaches are on the rise and greater efficiency from workers is expected.
- **Slower phone services** — Along with IRS staff reductions, an across-the-board hiring freeze has prevented filling job vacancies. For taxpayers contacting the IRS for technical issues, hold times, which were never good, can extend to an hour or more. These delays also extend to popular services like obtaining employer identification numbers and more alarming ones like issues connected with increased identity theft. (See related article on page 16).

- **Increased correspondence audits** — While office audits have decreased, the number of correspondence audits continues to grow. These audits are completed almost exclusively through the mail. In many instances, no specific agent or IRS representative is assigned to the audit, making it difficult to work through a complicated issue. Given the delay in communication, these audits can extend for quite a long time.
- **Increased matching notices** — A matching notice is sent when a company sends a Form W-2 or 1099 to the IRS that’s been omitted from a Form 1040. The IRS’s automated matching system will trigger a notice identifying the discrepancy and the tax obligation. With less oversight, incorrect matching notices are being sent, resulting in more taxpayer and advisor time to resolve the issues.
- **Show me the money** — While the IRS performs many functions, its ultimate mission is to collect all taxes owed to the government as efficiently as possible. Ultimately, a smaller IRS impacts the ability of the agency to serve taxpayers through efficient customer service and to identify — and collect from — taxpayers that aren’t paying their fair share. A smaller IRS means that taxpayers will often spend more time to get necessary services and that less revenue will be collected for the government to fulfill its obligations.

A shrinking IRS means longer hold times, slower services, and increased vulnerability to data breaches and identity theft. While we wait for a return to the days of “more with less,” let’s try to enjoy the fewer IRS visits while tolerating the slower service.



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Fraud.

GONE PHISHING

Identity thieves are filing false returns and obtaining tax refunds — all in the name of unsuspecting taxpayers.



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There's an epidemic hitting taxpayers, and it's unrelated to more cumbersome tax laws. Identity thieves have been filing fraudulent returns and receiving refunds — all in the name of other taxpayers.

It's been discomfoting to learn about the rising number of taxpayers who've submitted tax returns only to learn from the IRS that they had, unknowingly, already filed and received a refund. Here's how the scheme works.

Using someone else's name and Social Security number, identity thieves file a false tax return, creating fictitious W-2s showing employment and detailing that a refund is due. The online filing process is simple, allowing most thieves to file numerous fraudulent returns in a day.

The refund checks are mailed to the address or to the bank account listed on the return — and of course, neither reflects the actual taxpayer's information. While this discrepancy prevents a large number of refund requests from being processed, others get through at a cost of billions of dollars annually to the IRS and taxpayers.

This causes undue stress and hardship for the victims. If you're a tax fraud victim, the IRS freezes your refund, pending an investigation. And as mentioned on page 15, agency reductions have caused a backlog of claims that can take months to resolve — a process that leaves victims unable to obtain their refunds.

It's all possible because the thieves are able to gain access to personal information, which in many cases is offered voluntarily — albeit unwittingly. To reduce the risk of identity theft in tax-related schemes, keep the following in mind:

- **The IRS does not email taxpayers.** Don't fall victim to phishing emails that seek to extract your personal information. The temptation can be great, as identity thieves can disguise websites and emails to appear legitimate. For example, some company employees have received emails with instructions to wire funds that appear to come from company executives or board members. If you're uncertain about the authenticity of IRS-branded correspondence, contact your local IRS office to verify.
- **The IRS does not call taxpayers to request personal information.** The IRS already has your information, so there's no need to call you. As a general rule, never give out your Social Security number over the phone to someone requesting it.
- **The IRS opts for snail mail.** The IRS uses regular mail almost exclusively to correspond with taxpayers. Identity thieves understand this and also use paper correspondence to solicit personal information. If you're in doubt about the legitimacy of an IRS letter, contact your local office to verify.

The IRS is aware of the identify theft epidemic and has instituted measures that are becoming increasingly effective at preventing fraud.

However, it's a cat-and-mouse game, and identity thieves are staying ahead of the chase. In the meantime, awareness and skepticism are your best tools to prevent becoming a victim.