NATIONAL TAXPAYER ADVOCATE 2023 PURPLE BOOK: COMPILATION OF LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN TAXPAYER RIGHTS AND IMPROVE TAX ADMINISTRATION

INTRODUCTION

Section 7803(c)(2)(B)(ii)(IX) of the IRC requires the National Taxpayer Advocate, as part of the Annual Report to Congress, to propose legislative recommendations to resolve problems encountered by taxpayers. This year, we present 65 legislative recommendations.

We have taken the following steps to make these recommendations as accessible and user-friendly as possible for Members of Congress and their staffs:

- We have consolidated our recommendations from various sections of this year's report, prior reports, and other sources into this single volume.
- We have grouped our recommendations into categories that generally reflect the various stages in the tax administration process so that, for example, return filing issues are presented separately from audit and collection issues.
- We have presented each legislative recommendation in a format like the one used for congressional committee reports, with "Present Law," "Reasons for Change," and "Recommendation(s)" sections.
- This year, for the first time, we have added a summary section at the beginning of each legislative recommendation. It describes the "Problem" and our suggested "Solution" in layman's terms. Our objective is to allow readers to quickly get a feel for all 65 of our recommendations by scanning the summaries.
- Where bills have been introduced in the past that are generally consistent with one of our recommendations, we have included a footnote at the end of the recommendation that identifies one or more of those bills. (Because of the large number of bills introduced in each Congress, we may have overlooked some. We apologize for any bills we have inadvertently omitted.)
- We have compiled a table, which appears at the end of this volume as Appendix 1, that identifies additional materials relating to our recommendations, where such materials exist. In addition to identifying a larger number of prior bills than we cite in our footnotes, the table provides references to more detailed issue discussions that have been published in prior National Taxpayer Advocate reports.

By our count, Congress has enacted approximately 50 legislative recommendations that the National Taxpayer Advocate has proposed. See Appendix 2 for a complete listing. This total includes approximately 23 provisions that were included as part of the Taxpayer First Act.[1]

The Office of the Taxpayer Advocate is a non-partisan, independent organization within the IRS that advocates for the interests of taxpayers. We have dubbed this the "Purple Book" because the color purple, as a mix of red and blue, has come to symbolize bipartisanship. Historically, tax administration legislation has attracted bipartisan support. For example, the Taxpayer First Act was approved by both the House and the Senate in 2019 on voice votes with no recorded opposition.

1 Taxpayer First Act, Pub. L. No. 116-25, 133 Stat. 981 (2019). We say Congress enacted "approximately" a certain number of National Taxpayer Advocate recommendations because in some cases, enacted provisions are substantially similar to what we recommended but are not identical. The statement that Congress enacted a National Taxpayer Advocate recommendation is not intended to imply that Congress acted solely because of the recommendation. Congress, of course, receives suggestions from a wide variety of stakeholders on an ongoing basis and makes decisions based on the totality of the input it receives.

We believe most recommendations presented in this volume are non-controversial, common sense reforms that will strengthen taxpayer rights and improve tax administration. We hope the tax-writing committees, other Members of Congress, and their staffs find it useful, and we would be happy to discuss these recommendations in more detail with interested committees or Member offices.

We highlight the following ten legislative recommendations for particular attention:

- **Amend the "Lookback Period" to Allow Tax Refunds for Certain Taxpayers Who Took Advantage of the Postponed Filing Deadlines Due to COVID-19.** Because of the pandemic, the IRS postponed the tax return filing deadline to July 15 in 2020 and to May 17 in 2021. These postponements helped taxpayers by giving them more time to file their returns, but they are inadvertently springing a trap on unwary taxpayers and tax professionals that may cause permanent harm by limiting their ability to obtain refunds. Under IRC § 6511, taxpayers generally must meet a two-part test to receive a refund. First, the claim for refund must be timely; it generally must be filed by the later of three years from the date the return was filed or two years from the date the tax was paid. Second, the monies at issue must have been paid within a specified "lookback period." The lookback period is three years plus the period of any extension of time for filing if the taxpayer filed the claim for refund within three years from the date of filing the return. But a "postponement" of the filing deadline, unlike an "extension" of time to file, does not extend the lookback period. *A taxpayer who filed his or her original return under to a "postponement" granted by the IRS because of the federally declared disaster will not be entitled to a refund if the excess amounts were paid (or deemed paid) outside the lookback period.*

  To illustrate, a taxpayer who filed her 2019 return by the postponed filing deadline of July 15, 2020, might reasonably believe she has until July 15, 2023, to file her claim for refund (three years from the date she filed her return).[2] However, her taxes (withholding and estimated tax payments) were deemed paid on April 15, 2020, which falls outside the lookback period of three years from July 15, 2023. The IRS will deny a claim for refund filed after April 15, 2023, in this circumstance. We recommend Congress amend the lookback period so that when the IRS postpones a filing deadline due to a disaster declaration, taxpayers can recover amounts paid within three years *plus the period of the postponement, similar to the law for extensions to file*.

- **Authorize the IRS to Establish Minimum Competency Standards for Federal Tax Return Preparers.** The IRS receives over 160 million individual income tax returns each year, and paid tax return preparers prepare the majority of them. Both taxpayers and the tax system depend heavily on the ability of preparers to prepare accurate tax returns. Yet no one is required to pass a competency test to become a federal tax return preparer, and numerous studies have found that non-credentialed tax return preparers routinely prepare inaccurate returns, which harms taxpayers and tax administration. To protect the public, federal and state laws generally require lawyers, doctors, securities dealers, financial planners, actuaries, appraisers, contractors, motor vehicle operators, and even barbers and beauticians to obtain licenses or certifications and, in most cases, to pass competency tests. Taxpayers and the tax system would benefit from requiring federal tax return preparers to do so as well. The IRS sought to implement minimum standards beginning in 2011, including passing a basic competency test, but a U.S. Court of Appeals affirmed a U.S. district court opinion that the IRS lacked the authority to impose preparer standards without statutory authorization. The plan the IRS rolled out in 2011 was developed after extensive consultation with stakeholders and was supported by almost all

2 This year, a taxpayer has until July 17, 2023, to file a timely claim for refund, as July 15, 2023, is a Saturday. When the due date falls on a Saturday, Sunday, or legal holiday, IRC § 7503 provides that a taxpayer has until the next business day to file a timely claim.

such stakeholders. We recommend Congress authorize the IRS to reinstitute minimum competency standards.

- **Expand the Tax Court's Jurisdiction to Hear Refund Cases and Assessable Penalties.** Under current law, taxpayers who owe tax and wish to litigate a dispute with the IRS must go to the U.S. Tax Court, while taxpayers who have paid their tax and are seeking a refund must sue in a U.S. district court or the U.S. Court of Federal Claims. Although this dichotomy between deficiency cases and refund cases has existed for decades, we recommend Congress give taxpayers the option to litigate both deficiency and refund tax disputes in the U.S. Tax Court. Due to the tax expertise of its judges, the Tax Court is often better equipped to consider tax controversies than other courts. It is also more accessible to unsophisticated and unrepresented taxpayers than other courts because it uses informal procedures, particularly in disputes that do not exceed $50,000 for one tax year or period.

- **Restructure the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to Make It Simpler for Taxpayers and Reduce the Improper Payments Rate.** TAS has long advocated for dividing the EITC into two credits: (i) a refundable worker credit based on each individual worker's earned income, despite the presence of a qualifying child, and (ii) a refundable child credit that would reflect the costs of caring for one or more children. For wage earners, claims for the worker credit could be verified with nearly 100 percent accuracy by matching claims on tax returns against Forms W-2, reducing the improper payment rate on those claims to nearly zero. The portion of the EITC that varies based on family size would be combined with the child tax credit into a larger family credit. The National Taxpayer Advocate published a report making this recommendation in 2019,[3] and we continue to advocate for it.[4]

- **Expand the Protection of Taxpayer Rights by Strengthening the Low Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC) Program.** The LITC Program is an effective means to assist low-income taxpayers and taxpayers who speak English as a second language. When the LITC Program was established as part of the IRS Restructuring and Reform Act of 1998, IRC § 7526 limited annual grants to no more than $100,000 per clinic. The law also imposed a 100 percent "match" requirement so a clinic cannot receive more in grants than it raises from other sources. The nature and scope of the LITC Program has evolved considerably since 1998, and those requirements are preventing the program from expanding assistance to the largest possible universe of eligible taxpayers. We recommend that Congress remove the per-clinic cap and allow the IRS to reduce the match requirement to 25 percent if doing so would provide coverage for additional taxpayers.

- **Modify the Requirement That Written Receipts Acknowledging Charitable Contributions Must Pre-Date the Filing of a Tax Return.** To claim a charitable contribution, a taxpayer must receive a written acknowledgment from the donee organization before filing his or her tax return. For example, if a taxpayer contributes $5,000 to a church, synagogue, or mosque; files a tax return claiming the deduction on February 1; and receives a written acknowledgment on February 2, the deduction is not allowed – even if the taxpayer had credit card receipts and other documentation that fully and unambiguously substantiate the deduction. This requirement is inconsistent with congressional policy to encourage charitable giving. We recommend that Congress modify the substantiation rules to require reliable – but not necessarily advance – acknowledgment from the donee organization.

3 *See* National Taxpayer Advocate Fiscal Year 2020 Objectives Report to Congress, vol. 3 (Special Report: *Earned Income Tax Credit: Making the EITC Work for Taxpayers and the Government*), https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/JRC20_Volume3.pdf.

4 *See* National Taxpayer Advocate 2022 Annual Report to Congress (Research Study: *Exploring Earned Income Tax Credit Structures: Dividing the Credit Between a Worker and Child Component and Other Considerations*).

- **Clarify That Supervisory Approval Is Required Under IRC § 6751(b) Before Proposing Penalties.** IRC § 6751(b)(1) states: "No penalty under this title shall be assessed unless the initial determination of such assessment is personally approved (in writing) by the immediate supervisor of the individual making such determination… ." At first, it seems a requirement that an "initial determination" be approved by a supervisor would mean the approval must occur before the penalty is proposed. However, the timing of this requirement has been the subject of considerable litigation, with some courts holding that the supervisor's approval might be timely even if provided after a case has gone through the IRS Independent Office of Appeals and is in litigation. Very few taxpayers litigate their tax disputes. Therefore, to effectuate Congress's intent that the IRS not penalize taxpayers in certain circumstances without supervisory approval, the approval must be required earlier in the process. We recommend that Congress amend IRC § 6751(b)(1) to require that written supervisory approval be provided before the IRS sends a written communication to the taxpayer proposing a penalty.

- **Require That Math Error Notices Describe the Reason(s) for the Adjustment With Specificity, Inform Taxpayers They May Request Abatement Within 60 Days, and Be Mailed by Certified or Registered Mail.** Under IRC § 6213(b), the IRS may make a summary assessment of tax arising from a mathematical or clerical error. When the IRS does so, it must send the taxpayer a notice describing "the error alleged and an explanation thereof." By law, the taxpayer has 60 days from the date of the notice to request that the summary assessment be abated. However, many taxpayers do not understand that failing to respond to an IRS math error notice within 60 days means they have conceded the adjustment and forfeited their right to challenge the IRS's position in the U.S. Tax Court. To ensure taxpayers understand the adjustment and their rights to contest it, we recommend that Congress amend IRC § 6213(b) to require that the IRS specifically describe the error causing to the adjustment and inform taxpayers they have 60 days to request the summary assessment be abated. Additionally, requiring that the notice be sent either by certified or registered mail would underscore the significance of the notice and provide an additional safeguard to ensure that taxpayers receive this critical information.

- **Provide That "an Opportunity to Dispute" an Underlying Liability Means an Opportunity to Dispute Such Liability in a Prepayment Judicial Forum.** IRC §§ 6320(b) and 6330(b) provide taxpayers with the right to request an independent review of either a Notice of Federal Tax Lien (NFTL) filed by the IRS or a proposed levy action. The purpose of this collection due process (CDP) right is to give taxpayers adequate notice of IRS collection activity and provide a meaningful hearing to determine whether the IRS properly filed an NFTL or proposed or initiated a levy. The IRS and the courts interpret the current law to mean that an opportunity to dispute the underlying liability includes a prior opportunity for a conference with the IRS Independent Office of Appeals offered either before or after assessment of the liability, even where there is no opportunity for judicial review of the Appeals conference. The value of CDP proceedings is undermined when taxpayers who have never had an opportunity to dispute the underlying liability in a prepayment judicial forum are precluded from doing so during their CDP hearing. These taxpayers have no alternative but to pay the tax and then seek a refund by suing in a U.S. district court or the U.S. Court of Federal Claims – an option that not all taxpayers can afford. In our view, judicial and administrative interpretations limiting a taxpayer's ability to challenge the IRS's liability determination in a CDP hearing are inconsistent with Congress's intent when it enacted CDP procedures. We recommend that Congress modify these provisions to ensure taxpayers have a right to prepayment judicial review.

- **Provide That Assessable Penalties Are Subject to Deficiency Procedures.** IRC § 6212 requires the IRS to issue a "notice of deficiency" before assessing certain liabilities. IRC § 6671(a) authorizes the IRS to assess some penalties without first issuing a notice of deficiency. These penalties are generally subject to judicial review only if taxpayers first pay the penalties and then sue for a refund. Assessable penalties can be substantial, sometimes running into the millions of dollars. Under IRS interpretation, these penalties include, but are not limited to, foreign information reporting penalties under IRC §§ 6038, 6038A, 6038B, 6038C, and 6038D. The inability of taxpayers to obtain judicial review on a pre-assessment basis and the requirement that taxpayers pay the penalties in full to obtain judicial review on a post-assessment basis can effectively deprive taxpayers of the right to judicial review at all. To ensure taxpayers have an opportunity to obtain judicial review before they are required to pay often huge penalties that they do not believe they owe, we recommend that Congress require the IRS to issue a notice of deficiency before imposing assessable penalties.