

MAKING TAX SEASON LESS TAXING

Trap

For Evelyn, 2016 was very difficult with the lengthy illness and passing of her husband. She has been doing her best to take care of their two small children. Now, in 2017 she has to face doing the tax return alone, something her husband had always done. Evelyn knows she could figure it out and doesn't want to pay a tax preparer, but being both the sole bread winner and a single parent leaves her little time to herself. How would she manage getting all the papers together, let alone filling out the forms? Evelyn decided she'd better get some help...but where?

Tips

The tax preparation industry is not regulated in Florida, but Federal law requires all paid tax preparers to register with the IRS and get a Preparer Tax Identification Number (PTIN). Preparers must sign the tax return and include their PTIN. Consumers should not assume the PTIN will guarantee a properly prepared tax return. Here are some tips to make your 2016 tax return preparation a less "taxing" experience:

- Decide if you really need a tax preparer. Many tax returns are not complex and require only a simple filing. Call the IRS at 1-800-829-1040 or go online at <http://www.irs.gov> to locate free or minimum cost assistance programs.
- Look into the IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program by contacting the United Way. If you make \$49,000 or less, it's free. Go to: <http://www.unitedwaypbc.org> or call 561-375-6600.

You can get tax software and online "fillable" forms at <http://www.irs.gov/freefile>. Many libraries and post offices have tax forms. You can also get them from the IRS Tax Assistance Center (561-616-2002) at 1700 Palm Beach Lakes Blvd. in West Palm Beach.

- Taxpayers that they should keep copies of their prior-year tax returns for at least three years. Taxpayers who are changing tax software products this filing season will need their adjusted gross income from their 2015 tax return in order to file electronically. The Electronic Filing Pin is no longer an option. Taxpayers can visit IRS.Gov/GetReady for more tips on preparing to file their 2016 tax return

- The Internal Revenue Service announced in December that the nation's tax season will begin Monday, Jan. 23, 2017, and reminded taxpayers claiming certain tax credits to expect a longer wait for refunds.
- The IRS will begin accepting electronic tax returns that day, with more than 153 million individual tax returns expected to be filed in 2017. The IRS again expects more than four out of five tax returns will be prepared electronically using tax return preparation software.
- Many software companies and tax professionals will be accepting tax returns before Jan. 23 and then will submit the returns when IRS systems open. The IRS will begin processing paper tax returns at the same time. There is no advantage to filing tax returns on paper in early January instead of waiting for the IRS to begin accepting e-filed returns.
- The IRS reminds taxpayers that a new law requires the IRS to hold refunds claiming the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Additional Child Tax Credit (ACTC) until Feb. 15. In addition, the IRS wants taxpayers to be aware it will take several days for these refunds to be released and processed through financial institutions. Factoring in weekends and the President's Day holiday, the IRS cautions that many affected taxpayers may not have actual access to their refunds until the week of Feb. 27.
- If you need to use a tax preparer, shop around first. Get an estimate of costs up front. Ask about your preparer's qualifications. Check with national associations for local members: National Association of Tax Professionals, <http://www.natptax.com>, National Society of Tax Professionals, <http://www.nstp.org>, National Association of Tax Consultants, <http://www.natctax.org>.
- Be wary of preparers who promise a big refund or base their fee on the amount of your refund. You, not the preparer, are ultimately responsible for your tax return.
- Be cautious about "refund anticipation loans." These loans are secured by your anticipated tax refund and may carry hefty fees and interest rates. By using the IRS's e-file program, tax refunds can be processed in as little as 10 days.
- Good news: The **filing** deadline to submit 2016 **tax returns** is Tuesday, April 18, **2017**, rather than the traditional April 15 **date**.

**For more information, call Palm Beach County Consumer Affairs at
561-712-6600 (Boca/Delray 888-852-7362 toll free)**