Need Help with Taxes? The IRS Taxpayer Advocacy Panel Is More than Ready

Sojourner’s Truth Staff

It’s that very unfortunate time of the year again for most Americans – tax filing deadline. In households across the nation, not a good word to be had about the Internal Revenue Service – the demonic agency that has frustrated the hopes and dreams of wage earners for decades. And the way the agency is frequently used as a weapon by scheming politicians doesn’t add to whatever warm feelings some few, very few, Americans might harbor.

However, as daunting as dealing with the IRS might seem, it’s not all bad news. The IRS can actually be quite helpful, says the newest member of the Taxpayer Advocacy Panel – an all-volunteer advisory body whose mission is “to listen to taxpayers, identify issues that affect taxpayers and make suggestions for improving IRS service and customer satisfaction,” according to recruitment information from the IRS.

Andrea Price, former president and CEO of the Toledo region Mercy Health, is the latest volunteer with the Taxpayer Advocacy Panel. She noticed the IRS reaching out for volunteers several months ago and realized that it would be an opportunity for her to help participate in the TAP’s vision of “citizen volunteers valued for improving IRS services.”

“In trying to comply with an increasingly complex tax system, taxpayers may find they need different services than the IRS is currently providing,” said Nina E. Olson, the National Taxpayer Advocate. “The TAP is vital because it provides the IRS with the taxpayers’ perspective as well as recommendations for improvement. This helps the IRS deliver the best possible service to assist taxpayers in meeting their tax obligations.”

Olson, as National Taxpayer Advocate, is an IRS executive reporting directly to the IRS Commissioner. The TAP reports annually to Olson, to the IRS Commissioner and to the Secretary of the Treasury.

The TAP was established under President Clinton as a panel to direct citizen input to the IRS in order to help that agency improve its programs and procedures.

“They really do listen to us,” says Price. “The IRS sees the value of us as volunteers.”

The structure of the TAP consists of a cross section of the paying public with, ideally, at least one member from each state, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, in addition to one member representing international taxpayers – those U.S. citizens working, living or doing business abroad or in a U.S. territory.

The TAP divides its volunteers into six committees: Notices and Correspondence; Tax Forms and Publications; Taxpayer Assistance Center (TAC) improvement; Taxpayer Communications; Toll-free phone line; Special Projects. Price has been named to the Taxpayer Assistance Center committee.

The Taxpayer Assistance Center, a very little-known department of the IRS, has a string of offices around the nation to assist taxpayers with account inquiries, alien clearances, payment arrangements, tax forms, among other issues. There are two such offices in Ohio – one in Cincinnati and one in Cleveland. Price will be tasked with ensuring that the Assistance Center is providing sufficient assistance and to make recommendations for improving that assistance.

Once a year, Nina Olson and her staff prepare a “Purple Book” to release information to Congress – the color purple (a combination of red and blue) emphasizing the non-partisan nature of the taxpayer advocates’ office. “They have made it clear to us that we are non-partisan,” says Price. And not merely non-partisan but advocates for all taxpayers, no matter their political leanings. “The message from the IRS advocate office is ‘don’t ever give up in the fight for taxpayers’ best interest,’” she adds.

Price’s self-defined task now is to get the word about those services. She will be reaching out to various community groups, tax preparing firms, agencies, social clubs, businesses and organizations. She wants “to get out and get suggestions and input” from those in the community and neighborhoods about what problems the IRS presents to the taxpayers and how the agency can improve its service.

Interested parties can reach Price at the Taxpayer Advocacy Panel’s telephone at 1-888-912-1227, her phone at 419-517-9294, through its website at www.improveirs.gov and by email at tapohioandreaprice@gmail.com.