

Speaking up for taxpayers

Nina Olson, the government's official "national taxpayer advocate," is empowered by Congress to speak up within the IRS for the ordinary citizen. Appointed in March 2001, she has been outspoken in urging consumer-friendly procedures. A Philadelphia native, Olson is a fine-arts graduate of Bryn Mawr College and also has law degrees from North Carolina Central University and Georgetown University. She talked with Senior Editor Leonard Wiener.



Nina Olson pushes access to IRS.

What's a major complaint of taxpayers?

Navigating the IRS is the biggie for most people. A lot of them can't get through, have to call several

times to reach the right person, or do not get promised return calls. We must make it easier for people with problems to find their way around, even if that means better public listings of IRS

departments and using IRS operators whose sole job is to get people to the right place. My office is nudging the IRS along.

So reaching a human is important?

Everybody would like to talk to a real person, but that isn't necessary or affordable. Checking the status of a refund can often be handled on the Internet or by an automated phone system that taps into IRS computers. It is unacceptable, however, that some people get notices of an adjustment and are given a

number to call but are left in the lurch with a recorded message and no follow-up. The IRS has to recognize that it will not be able to funnel all calls into an automated system and that a one-on-one conversation may settle a problem that could otherwise drag on.

It would help if IRS notices were clearer.

Absolutely, and the agency is working on making its communications more to the point. Sometimes people will get a notice with pages of calculations of tax and interest and penalties, but the explanation of what it is all about is buried at the end. The important information should be clearly explained upfront.

What about the confusion often faced when figuring tax on a child's income?

There is little the IRS can do because it is the tax code that makes this so complex. There has to be a legislative change.

Many people pay someone to prepare their return. Any problems there?

There should be more regulation and testing to make sure these people meet a minimum standard of competency. Taxpayers have a right to expect that. We hear of clients who get hit with extra tax and other charges—or lose out on benefits—because their preparer didn't understand the rules or did not keep up with changes. I've proposed that paid preparers—other than already licensed or regulated CPAs, lawyers, and IRS-enrolled agents—be required to pass an initial test on their knowledge and be retested yearly. To help enforcement, an ad campaign would urge people to check a preparer's credentials and be sure that the preparer is identified on the return.

You, of course, do your own return?

Absolutely do. I am the family tax return preparer.