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Every tax season brings news stories about thieves filing fraudulent tax returns and getting refunds using stolen personal and financial information.

Other than being concerned, is there anything taxpayers can do? The answer is "yes". And they can do so with help from the IRS which has instituted a number of processes for combating identity theft and assisting taxpayers who are, or may become, identity theft victims.

First, remember that the IRS doesn't initiate contact with taxpayers by emails, text messages or other social media to request personal or financial information. Be very suspicious if you get an email that appears to be from the IRS asking for personal information. Go to the IRS website (www.irs.gov) and click on the "Reporting Phishing" link where you'll find the IRS' advice on handling this type of email (e.g., do not answer the email; do report it using the dedicated IRS email address provided at the IRS link).

Second, the IRS has implemented processes for tax-related and non-tax-related identity theft victims or possible victims. Information about these issues, plus the IRS contacts, can be found on the IRS website under several links (e.g., "Get Important Information"; "Identity Theft"; "Identity Protection").

The IRS website has multiple links and topics – far too many to cover in this blog. I've thought of several overarching questions taxpayers might have with a short summary of the information provided on the IRS website. More information about these, and other, issues can be found on the IRS website:

1. How Can I Know If I'm An Identity Theft Victim? One way is if a taxpayer receives a letter from the IRS stating that someone has already filed a tax return using the same personal

information. That might be the first time the taxpayer learns that she's been an identity theft victim and that her tax account has been affected. The IRS website outlines other ways a taxpayer might discover that she's been a victim as well as the steps a taxpayer who receives such a letter should take (e.g., contact the IRS office and/or staff member that will be identified in the letter).

2. Who Can I Contact At The IRS If I Have Been, Or Think I May Become, An Identity Theft Victim? IRS has created the Identity Protection Specialized Unit (IPSU) with representatives who can help taxpayers under either situation. This includes taxpayers who may already have been in contact with the IRS but want or need additional assistance with their issues. The representatives can also assist taxpayers who've lost personal or financial information (e.g., wallet, purse, credit card) and fear becoming identity theft victims. The IPSU has a toll-free number (1-800-908-4490) and its hours of operation and other information are on the IRS website.

3. Are There Any Special IRS Documents I Can Use? The IRS has created an IRS Identity Theft Affidavit that a taxpayer can use if he has been, or believes he could become, an identity theft victim. The taxpayer fills out and submits the Affidavit which requests the IRS to mark his tax account with a special filter so that any questionable activity associated with his tax account will be flagged. The IRS website has a link to the Affidavit.

4. What Else Is IRS Doing To Help Taxpayers? The IRS has created several identity theft screening filters. These filters help the IRS spot false returns and detect fraud. These filters can be generated either through a taxpayer filing the above-mentioned Affidavit or by the IRS itself. Once a tax return is flagged, the IRS will correspond with the person who sent in the return to make sure the IRS has the right taxpayer; they will do so before doing any further processing of the tax return.

5. What Other Topics Are Found On the Website? In addition to these issues, the website lists links to information such as: IRS tips so taxpayers can protect themselves against identity theft; other governmental and non-governmental resources for identity theft victims; a "Taxpayer Guide to Identity Theft"; and updates about IRS' special identity theft enforcement efforts and pilots.

Thieves work year round and not just at tax time. Taxpayers need to know about the available IRS resources so they can be equally vigilant.

