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You filed your federal or NJ income taxes with an error. What to do

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So, you sent all your income tax documents to your accountant. They sent you a return. Everything looked good, and you gave your accountant the green light, and they submitted it to the IRS. You've made the April 15 deadline.

Everything's good to go, right?

What if the accountant made a mistake, entering \$6.50 rather than \$65, and now you're on the hook from the IRS for unpaid taxes? What happens next — and who's at fault?

The answer is counterintuitive, tax experts told NorthJersey.com.

"If it's an error, the penalties and interest — that's something where the preparer can offer to cover." But "ultimately the taxpayer is responsible for the taxes," said June Toth, an accountant at the East Brunswick accounting firm WilkinGuttenplan.

"I think taxpayers get confused," Toth said. "By law, the return is the taxpayer's responsibility, regardless of who prepares it." Toth was previously president of the New Jersey Society of Certified Public Accountants, a trade group.

Monetary or legal trouble?

Usually, when an accountant makes a mistake, they'll take remedial measures to fix it, said Jay Soled, who chairs the accounting department at Rutgers Business School in Newark.

If the accountant makes the mistake, it's only monetary penalties that the taxpayer may face, rather than any legal trouble.

"If the client does file a corrective return before the IRS comes knocking, then in my experience, the IRS will only impose an interest payment," Soled said in a phone interview.

Representatives for both the IRS and the New Jersey Treasury Department said in emailed statements that they'll notify the taxpayer if they've made a mistake. And it will come by mail, said IRS spokesperson John Fudd.

"The best recourse for someone who caught a mistake would be to notify their preparer and request that they fix it," New Jersey Treasury spokesperson Darryl Isherwood said. "The taxpayer could also file their own amended tax return to correct the mistake."

Any recourse against whoever filed your taxes?

So, if your accountant made an error, is there any recourse for you, their client? It depends.

Toth said that if the tax preparer takes steps to help fix the inaccurate tax return, "that should be fine."

There could be more serious instances in which a person could file a complaint with the New Jersey State Board of Accountancy, she said.

You can seek an extension to the April 15 deadline to file your taxes. But be careful of late penalties on any tax you owe.

"Say that a taxpayer provided the tax information to their preparer, and they assumed that the tax preparer filed the return ... and then they find out later on that maybe that particular year or multiple years ... the tax preparer obviously breached some professional standard," Toth said. "That would warrant potentially malpractice or a complaint to officials."

"A reputable tax practitioner will help fix the return. Either they're going to prepare an amended return or provide the explanation to the taxpayer ... correspondence to the taxing agency, at either no cost or a reduced cost depending on what the error is," Toth said.

What are the most common mistakes?

The most common errors typically are mathematical and clerical, said Janet Holtzblatt, a senior fellow at the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center.

"They file a return, and the numbers don't add up," she said in a phone interview. "There's another type of error where they might put something in the wrong line."

Yet another common error occurs when the person filling out the tax form enters a Social Security number that does not match what the IRS has on file, Holtzblatt said.

In other instances, the tax preparer might leave off information from key tax documents like the 1099 or W-2, not computing self-employment tax, or missing key deadlines, Toth said.

Other mistakes accountants can make are not asking the client if they have a foreign bank account, or if they own or operate any foreign corporations, said Soled, of Rutgers.

For 2024, the IRS received over 139 million tax returns, and 5.5 million of them were “suspended” by the IRS because of errors or identity theft concerns, agency figures show.

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