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PEOPLE

A GLANCE AROUND TOWN AND COUNTY

How to avoid fraud & identity theft this tax season



Special to the Herald

By Jessica Ludvigsen

Taxes used to be so simple: Fill out a few boxes, add up the columns, sign the paperwork and send it all to the Internal Revenue Service. But in the last decade or so, the internet has dramatically changed that paradigm. And while electronic filing is faster and usually more accurate, it also opens us up to fraud and identity theft.

In the first nine months of 2016, the IRS stopped more than 780,000 confirmed identity theft returns, totaling more than \$4 billion. But wouldn't you rather do all that you can to prevent identity theft, than leaving it up to the IRS?

Now that the 2017 tax season is in full swing, here are a few tips on how to avoid becoming an IRS statistic:

Choose a Reputable Returns Preparer – Before handing over all of your personal documents and financial information to a tax firm, it's important to do a little research. Be sure to ask the preparer for an IRS Preparer Tax Identification Number (PTIN), which is given to tax return preparers by the IRS. You can also ask the Better Business Bureau about a preparer's disciplinary actions and license status.

Don't procrastinate - If the early bird gets the worm, then the early tax filer can avoid the risk of identity theft. Once a return is filed with the IRS, the information, including the social security number, can't be used by anyone else. If you file your taxes first, a thief can't do it for you.

Be Secure and Safe – Identity thieves can be a tricky bunch, but you can outsmart them. When filing electronically, always use security software with anti-virus protections and never click on links or download attachments from suspicious emails. And if the IRS wants to contact you, the agency will never send an unsolicited email or text message or use social media to discuss personal tax issues. If you think you've been a victim of fraud, contact the IRS by calling 800-366-4484. For more tips on how to protect yourself from fraud and identity theft, visit AxiomBanking.com.

Something else to remember this tax season: the deadline to file is April 18. That's because this year, April 15 – the date when taxes are typically due – falls on a Saturday. And Monday, April 17, is Emancipation Day, a holiday in Washington D.C. Because of those two factors, Tax Day has been shifted to Tuesday, April 18. But just because you have a few extra days to file, doesn't mean you should wait until the very last day to do so. In fact, I recommend filing as early as possible, because those returns are less subject to fraud.

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