Government Agencies Making Moves to Deny Access to Paper-Based Information and Services

AF&PA working with Congress to protect U.S. citizens' right to choose paper format.

By Donna Harman, President and CEO, AF&PA

While Benjamin Franklin’s old adage – “Nothing is certain except for death and taxes” – holds true, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has made some big changes in how U.S. citizens must complete the tax process.

The IRS has plans to move to widespread electronic communication in the next five years. A “government of the people” should, above all others, know and meet the needs of its constituents. Many Americans today lack computer skills, have concerns about online security, and prefer to have paper documentation of transactions. The rush to digitize government interaction is shortsighted and disenfranchises too many Americans, with 30 percent of American adults without broadband access at home. For citizens over 65, this number rises to 53 percent, and 45 percent of seniors do not even own a computer. And interestingly, computer savvy Millennials are, according to recent surveys, more likely to file their taxes on paper than any other age group.

In the midst of completing the necessary and onerous tax process, people should be able to choose the manner in which they receive information and services from the federal government. In the midst of completing the necessary and onerous tax process, people should be able to choose the manner in which they receive information and services from the federal government.

For the 2014 tax year, the IRS announced that it will no longer mail tax forms to U.S. taxpayers. In addition, the IRS discontinued sending the Tax Instruction Guide for individuals (Publication 17) to individual filers through the mail, and stopped equipping libraries or post offices with the booklet for distribution, as it has done in the past. Publication 17 is a critical resource for every American who files his or her own tax returns. The only place to find the instructions on paper is through the Government Printing Office, where a hard copy version can be ordered for $23.

Our country expects its citizens to fulfill their obligation of filing annual taxes. In turn, our government has a responsibility to supply the necessary information in a manner that people can access, which must include paper.

Nina E. Olson leads the Taxpayer Advocate Service and, in her appointed position as the National Taxpayer Advocate, is required by statute to report to the U.S. Congress twice a year. In her most recent National Taxpayer Advocate report to Congress, Olson wrote, “Based on our internal discussions with IRS officials, [we have] been left with the distinct impression that the IRS’s ultimate goal is ‘to get out of the business of talking with taxpayers.’”
Rep. Dan Benishek (R-MI) has taken a lead in protecting taxpayers' right to choose paper communication. He has introduced a bill, the Personal Access to Paper Election Reform (PAPER) Act, to require the IRS to mail paper forms to any individual who filed a paper return for the preceding taxable year.

Congressman Benishek has also been active in the media, calling for the reinstatement of the paper tax guide for individuals.

**TAX TIME SAVINGS BOND PROGRAM**

The Tax Time Savings Bond program allows taxpayers the option to receive their tax refunds in the form of a paper U.S. savings bond. The program is set to expire at the end of the 2016 tax season. The U.S. Treasury Department ended the over-the-counter sale of paper savings bonds in 2012 and this program is now the only way to obtain a paper savings bond.

Citizens who do not have bank accounts or reliable Internet access will lose this savings opportunity if the program is allowed to lapse.

Bills in both houses of Congress have been introduced to preserve the Tax Time Savings Bond program. In the U.S. House of Representatives, Rep. Matt Cartwright (D-PA) has introduced the Save Access to a Valuable Investment Needed to Generate Savings (SAVINGS) Act, and its companion was introduced in the Senate by Sens. Patty Murray (D-WA) and Susan Collins (R-ME).

**TAKE ACTION**

Help these members of Congress bring attention to the attempts of the IRS to abandon those without reliable Internet access and limit its interaction with Americans. You can use the AFRPA Grow the Vote website, http://bit.ly/growvote, to find your legislators. Ask your:

- U.S. Senators to co-sponsor the PAPER Act (S. 2478); and
- U.S. House of Representatives to co-sponsor the PAPER Act (H.R. 3673) and SAVINGS Act (H.R. 1652).

The IRS should not be allowed to impose digital-only access as a one-size-fits-all requirement for taxpayers. Data shows that there are Americans who simply can’t access digital-only information, and they have no less right to information than anyone else. Support of these bills will help safeguard Americans' opportunity to choose the manner in which they receive information and services from the tax collector.