



Americans Deserve the Option of Paper from Their Government

By Donna Harman, President and CEO, AF&PA

April 15th is known as “Tax Day” in the U.S. Granted, it’s not a day most of us look forward to, but the process of filing your taxes is one that most Americans take seriously as their civic responsibility. Imagine if your ability to fulfill that responsibility was inhibited by actions of the very government agency requiring your filing. That is happening today as the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has discontinued not only the mailing of paper-based tax forms but, beginning this year, is no longer providing printed instructions for completing tax forms.

Why is this important? Doesn’t everyone file their taxes electronically anyway, you may ask? No, there is actually a significant portion of our population who either prefers or relies upon paper to receive communication from its government and to fulfill their obligations in return. In 2014, over 23 million tax returns were submitted on paper.

But, can’t everyone just download the tax instructions and print themselves if they wish? No, the ability to access filing instructions and file electronically is still not readily available to many Americans: 30 percent of the U.S. population lacks broadband access at home. According to the Pew Internet Project, 41 percent of Americans age 65 and older do not use the internet or email. Yet those without internet access are still expected to file their annual income taxes. How will they do that? It would appear they are on their own to figure it out.

Americans of all ages living in all regions of our country deserve to have access to information and services from government, especially when they are fulfilling an obligation as basic as filing income taxes. Agencies are disregarding the needs of many Americans who have contributed to the success of our country and those who may be the most vulnerable. By making access to forms and information available only on the internet, many Americans are left out of the necessary flow of information.

IRS withdrawal of the option for citizens to request and receive paper tax filing instructions this year is just the latest in a disturbing trend of U.S. government agencies making such unilateral decisions, creating difficulties for millions of Americans. The U.S. Department of the Treasury has ended the sale of



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paper savings bonds, even though nearly three-quarters of the savings bonds sold in 2012 were in paper format. The Social Security Administration has announced plans to move virtually all senior citizens currently receiving their Social Security benefit checks through the mail to direct deposit, even though 9.6 million households do not have a bank account, according to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC). The Veterans Administration invested nearly half-million dollars in a paperless claims system, only to have the number of claims taking more than 125 days to process increase three-fold.

For those who cannot access digital information in a convenient way, paper is their access point to important information from government. And, many Americans simply prefer the security, familiarity and peace of mind that sending and receiving paper documents provide.

While digital is a part of life today, so is paper. The policies and means by which our government serves its citizens should ensure that citizens have the choice of paper to receive information and services they need to fulfill their civic duty. ■

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