



## Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration Office of Audit

### **BETTER INFORMATION IS NEEDED TO ASSESS ONGOING EFFORTS TO EXPAND SELF-ASSISTANCE AND VIRTUAL SERVICES TO TAXPAYERS**

Issued on July 5, 2012

## Highlights

Highlights of Report Number: 2012-40-073 to the Internal Revenue Service Commissioner for the Wage and Investment Division.

### **IMPACT ON TAXPAYERS**

Taxpayers have different preferences and behaviors that affect their service needs. The IRS's challenge is to meet taxpayer needs and determine how to provide the best services with its limited resources. The IRS is implementing or testing four strategic initiatives to examine the feasibility of Facilitated Self-Assistance and video conferencing technology as alternative service delivery options for taxpayers who seek traditional face-to-face contacts at Taxpayer Assistance Centers and Volunteer Program sites.

### **WHY TIGTA DID THE AUDIT**

This audit was initiated to determine the effectiveness of the IRS's efforts to expand taxpayer assistance using self-assistance and virtual technology service options. Providing taxpayers with alternative service delivery methods should afford the IRS opportunities to provide services in locations that are not staffed or are unable to meet taxpayer demand.

### **WHAT TIGTA FOUND**

A limited number of taxpayers have used these alternative services: 33,636 used Facilitated Self-Assistance in the Taxpayer Assistance Centers and 5,938 at the Volunteer Program sites, while 8,514 used Virtual Services at the Taxpayer Assistance Centers and 2,101 at the Volunteer Program sites. Although these service options appear to be viable alternatives to serve more taxpayers and preserve limited resources, the IRS does not yet have sufficient data to determine if Facilitated Self-Assistance and Virtual Services are an effective and efficient means of providing customer service. Additionally, these services are not consistently offered to taxpayers who may need or desire them.

The IRS is collecting data to determine the number of taxpayers who use Facilitated Self-Assistance and Virtual Services located in Taxpayer Assistance Centers

and Volunteer Program sites. In some instances, it is gathering customer satisfaction ratings. Nevertheless, it has not established goals and measures for all four initiatives to gauge their success, including data to determine if any or all are cost effective.

In addition, auditors had difficulty contacting or locating Volunteer Program sites that offered Facilitated Self-Assistance or Virtual Services, and the IRS does not publish on IRS.gov the Taxpayer Assistance Centers offering Facilitated Self-Assistance.

### **WHAT TIGTA RECOMMENDED**

TIGTA recommended that the IRS develop sufficient measures (including a customer satisfaction survey) and goals for the Facilitated Self-Assistance initiative in the Taxpayer Assistance Centers that will allow the IRS to determine if the initiative is cost effective and is meeting expectations. After establishing a baseline, the IRS should develop goals and measures for the Virtual Services initiative in the Volunteer Program sites to ensure it is meeting expectations. In addition, the IRS should emphasize to employees and volunteers the need to consistently offer taxpayers the option of using the Facilitated Self-Assistance when available at their Taxpayer Assistance Center or Volunteer Program site. These alternative service options should be accurately publicized on IRS.gov.

IRS management agreed with three of the four recommendations and plans to take actions to improve its efforts to expand and monitor taxpayer assistance using self-assistance and virtual technology service options. IRS management partially agreed with one recommendation, but stated that usage is a better measure than a customer satisfaction survey for the Facilitated Self-Assistance initiative.

### **READ THE FULL REPORT**

To view the report, including the scope, methodology, and full IRS response, go to:

<http://www.treas.gov/tigta/auditreports/2012reports/201240073fr.pdf>.

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