

#23 PROVIDE TAXPAYER PROTECTIONS BEFORE THE IRS RECOMMENDS THE FILING OF A LIEN FORECLOSURE SUIT ON A PRINCIPAL RESIDENCE

Present Law

The IRS may follow either of two sets of procedures to seize the principal residence of a taxpayer to satisfy a delinquent tax liability: (i) an administrative seizure or (ii) a lien foreclosure suit. The two cannot be used concurrently.

Administrative Seizure. Internal Revenue Code (IRC) § 6334(a)(13) provides that the principal residence of a taxpayer is generally exempt from levy, except as provided in subsection (e). IRC § 6334(e) provides that a principal residence shall *not* be exempt from levy if a judge or magistrate of a U.S. District Court “approves (in writing) the levy of such residence.” An administrative seizure is subject to significant taxpayer protections. Among them, IRC § 6343(a) requires the IRS to release a levy under certain circumstances, including where it determines that the levy “is creating an economic hardship due to the financial condition of the taxpayer.”

Lien Foreclosure Suit. IRC § 7403 authorizes the Department of Justice (DOJ) to file a civil action against a taxpayer in U.S. District Court to enforce a tax lien and foreclose on a taxpayer’s property, including on a taxpayer’s principal residence. As compared with administrative seizures, statutory taxpayer protections are considerably more limited in lien foreclosure suits. For example, the Supreme Court has held that courts have essentially no discretion to refuse to authorize a sale simply to protect the interests of the delinquent taxpayer.¹⁰²

Reasons for Change

In enacting the IRS Restructuring and Reform Act of 1998, the Senate Finance Committee report stated that the “seizure of the taxpayer’s principal residence is particularly disruptive to the occupants” and a principal residence therefore “should only be seized to satisfy tax liability as a last resort.”¹⁰³

Meaningful taxpayer protections are needed to protect not only the taxpayer himself but also family members, including a spouse and minor children, who may live in the house.

As described above, taxpayers have far fewer statutory protections in lien foreclosure suits under IRC § 7403 than in administrative seizures under IRC § 6334(e).

At the recommendation of the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate, the IRS has written procedures into its Internal Revenue Manual (IRM) that provide additional taxpayer protections before a case may be referred to the DOJ for the filing of a lien foreclosure suit. The IRM prescribes certain initial steps IRS employees must take, such as attempting to identify the occupants of a residence and advising the taxpayer about Taxpayer Advocate Service assistance options. It also sets forth an internal approval process prior to referring a lien enforcement case to the DOJ. However, the IRM is simply a set of instructions to IRS staff. Taxpayers generally may not rely on IRM violations as a basis for challenging IRS actions in court, and the IRS may modify or rescind IRM provisions at any time.

¹⁰² *United States v. Rodgers*, 461 U.S. 677, 709 (1983).

¹⁰³ S. REP. NO. 105-174, at 86-87 (1998).

Because of the devastating impact the seizure of a taxpayer's principal residence may have on the taxpayer and his or her family, the National Taxpayer Advocate believes taxpayer protections from lien foreclosure suit referrals should be codified and not left for the IRS to determine through IRM procedures.

Recommendations

- Amend IRC § 7403 to codify current IRM administrative protections, including that an IRS employee must receive executive-level written approval to proceed with a lien foreclosure suit referral.
- Amend IRC § 7403 to preclude IRS employees from requesting that the DOJ file a civil action in U.S. District Court seeking to enforce a tax lien and foreclose on a taxpayer's principal residence, except where the employee has determined that (1) the taxpayer's other property or rights to property, if sold, would be insufficient to pay the amount due, including the expenses of the proceedings and (2) the foreclosure and sale of the residence would not create an economic hardship due to the financial condition of the taxpayer.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ For legislative language generally consistent with this recommendation, see Small Business Taxpayer Bill of Rights Act, H.R. 1828, 114th Cong. § 16 (2015); Small Business Taxpayer Bill of Rights Act, S. 949, 114th Cong. § 16 (2015); and Eliminating Improper and Abusive IRS Audits Act, S. 2215, 113th Cong. § 8 (2014).