

Efforts to Improve Taxpayer Advocacy

TAS INTAKE STRATEGY RESOLVES TAXPAYER PROBLEMS AND BRINGS CORRECT CASES TO TAS

The TAS Intake Strategy focuses on TAS's primary mission to serve the most vulnerable taxpayers and to speak directly with these taxpayers at the earliest opportunity. TAS receives case referrals from two sources — internal referrals from IRS toll-free lines (including the National Taxpayer Advocate toll-free line¹) and external referrals from taxpayers and practitioners through letters, faxes, and office visits. TAS has historically had Intake Advocates in the local offices to handle the external referrals, as well as those cases the IRS loaded onto the system through internal referrals.²

In early 2013, TAS established the Centralized Case Intake (CCI) function to handle internal referrals from the National Taxpayer Advocate toll-free line.³ Under the CCI process, IRS employees staffing the National Taxpayer Advocate toll-free line directly transfer calls they believe meet TAS criteria to TAS Intake Advocates through the TAS toll-free line.⁴ The CCI strategy affords Intake Advocates the opportunity to spend the appropriate time necessary to complete an in-depth interview to validate that the taxpayer's account-related issue(s) are appropriate for TAS or to resolve the taxpayer's issues during initial contact.

CCI Continues to Enhance TAS's Service to Taxpayers

Through the second quarter of Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, CCI Intake Advocates answered 38,169 calls transferred from Wage and Investment (W&I) employees, a 126 percent increase compared to the same period in FY 2015.⁵ They also created 27,811 TAS cases from those transferred calls, a 109 percent increase compared to the same period in FY 2015.⁶

1 The National Taxpayer Advocate's toll-free number is 1-877-777-4778.

2 Previously, when the IRS toll-free lines received a case they determined met TAS criteria, they would load the case onto the Accounts Management System (AMS) which would then be transferred directly to TAS. This process continues for all IRS toll-free lines except the NTA toll-free line. NTA toll-free calls are now handled under the CCI process.

3 Memorandum of Understanding Between The National Treasury Employees Union and the Internal Revenue Service Regarding TAS Toll Free Intake Line Proof of Concept (Apr. 18, 2013).

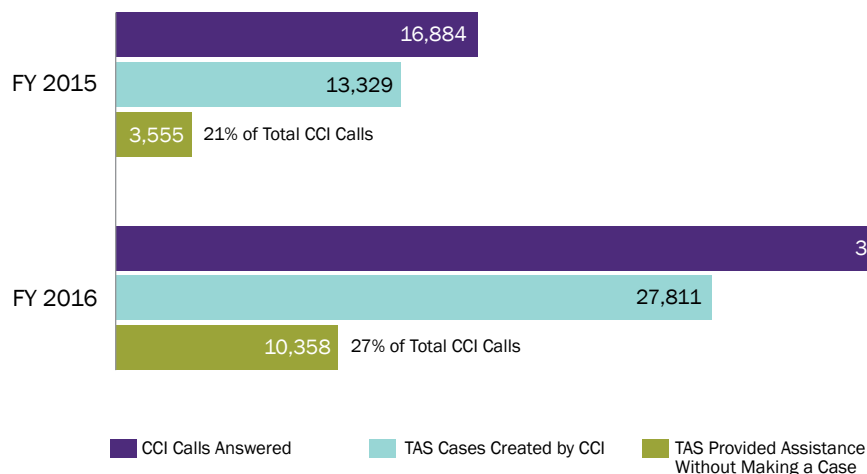
4 Effective February 29, 2016, and until further notice, the direct dialed ASK-TAS1 line is closed. The decision to close the line will allow TAS to maximize its telephone staffing.

5 See IRS, *Aspect Application Activity Report*, (Oct. 1, 2015 - Mar. 31, 2016).

6 Data obtained from Taxpayer Advocate Management Information System (TAMIS) (Apr. 1, 2016).

FIGURE 5.1.1⁷

CCI Calls Answered and TAS Cases Created, October-March, FYs 2015 and 2016



For the remaining 27 percent (10,358) of calls,⁸ CCI Intake Advocates addressed taxpayers' concerns and avoided opening new TAS cases, allowing TAS to use its resources for more complex cases requiring specialized skills. Intake Advocates resolved the calls by providing the taxpayer with an explanation of their account-related issues, by walking taxpayers through self-help options available on irs.gov to help them resolve problems on their own more expeditiously, and by educating taxpayers to avoid similar problems in the future.

TAS Successfully Concludes CCI Negotiations With National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU)

CCI began as a pilot program. TAS and NTEU, however, recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Change in Intake Process which includes the establishment of the CCI Organization.⁹ With this agreement, Intake Advocates at the centralized sites will be under a separate director, rather than under the Local Taxpayer Advocates (LTAs).¹⁰ While the centralized sites will be a separate function that handles direct transfers from the NTA toll-free line, all TAS Intake Advocates perform the same essential intake duties, including the extended initial interview and case building.

⁷ IRS, *Aspect Application Activity Report*, (Oct. 1, 2015 - Mar. 31, 2016); Data obtained from TAMIS (Apr. 1, 2016).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Memorandum of Understanding Between the National Treasury Employees Union and the Internal Revenue Service Regarding Change in the Intake Process Which Includes the Establishment of the Centralized Case Intake (CCI) Organization (May 16, 2016).

¹⁰ Under the CCI proof of concept model, the Intake Advocates reported directly to the LTAs.

Delegated Authorities Will Further Enhance Taxpayer Service

One of the most critical outcomes of the NTEU negotiations is that all Intake Advocates will soon have a new Internal Revenue Manual (IRM) section dedicated to them and they will have new delegated authorities.¹¹ Previously, Intake Advocates had no authority to take any action on a case other than to take the taxpayer's information and enter the case into Taxpayer Advocate Management Information System (TAMIS). Obtaining delegated authorities for the Intake Advocates allows TAS to fully implement the Intake Advocate strategy. Intake Advocates will be able to take many of the initial actions that Case Advocates currently take — address changes, ordering transcripts, setting up streamlined installment agreements and securing simple collections holds. Taxpayers who speak with our Intake Advocates at the earliest possible opportunity experience the benefit of working with a TAS employee who can take some initial actions, possibly assist the taxpayer and close the issue without accepting a case in TAS, or referring the taxpayer to the proper area for assistance, including self-help options, or create a case in TAS and begin case building by requesting pertinent documents. This approach allows TAS to have contact with the taxpayer as soon as possible, often in real time, and will free up critical time for the Case Advocates while also providing additional experience to our Intake Advocates so they can qualify as a Case Advocate.

Staffing Challenges Continue to Limit CCI Expansion

TAS continues to look forward to a potential expansion of the CCI program. CCI is a telephone-based operation that we have not historically had in TAS. The workload in CCI is dependent on what happens on the IRS toll-free line. If the IRS puts more assistors on the phone, then more calls get transferred to CCI and we cannot keep up with the demand. If the IRS wants to increase the level of service on the phones, it can pull staffing from elsewhere and put more people on the phones. TAS does not have enough Intake Advocates to keep up with demand during peak season because we do not have nimble staffing that can be moved around as demand increases. As we look to expand CCI, TAS is considering the best staffing model for CCI.

FOCUS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2017

In Fiscal Year 2017, TAS will continue to:

- Train all TAS Intake Advocates on delegated authorities to allow them to handle basic processes to resolve taxpayer issues;
- Develop and implement a quality measurement system on the intake process and a customer satisfaction measurement process to measure the effectiveness of CCI;
- Identify next steps to expand the CCI process to accept transfer calls in real time from assistors staffing other W&I Accounts Management toll-free product lines, including the general 800-829-1040 product line; and
- Conduct an analysis of LTA offices to determine the correct number of Intake Advocates they need to handle the referrals that come to the local offices through phone calls, letters, and faxes.

11 TAS, *Authority of the Taxpayer Advocate Service Employees to Perform Certain Administrative Functions* (July 27, 2015).

TAS CONTINUES TO EVALUATE AND EXPAND ITS LOCAL PRESENCE TO BEST MEET TAXPAYER NEEDS

Under Internal Revenue Code (IRC) § 7803(c)(2)(D), the National Taxpayer Advocate is required to maintain at least one Local Taxpayer Advocate in each state. TAS has previously maintained 75 local offices¹² throughout the country (including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) and over the past year, has reevaluated the placement of those offices. As the IRS moves away from a local presence and geographic focus on taxpayers, the statutory authority of TAS having a local presence has become an even more important aspect of its strategy. TAS remains committed to ensuring all taxpayers who are in need of TAS's services have access to them. Because populations shift over time, and different taxpayer issues emerge, TAS periodically revisits its geographic locations and the allocation of staffing.

Early in 2015, TAS conducted a detailed analysis of case receipts and taxpayer demographics to identify areas that have a large population of taxpayers who need TAS services but do not currently have a TAS office. As a result of this analysis, TAS has opened three new offices: San Diego and San Jose in California, and St. Petersburg, Florida. TAS has staffed these offices by not backfilling attritions in other TAS locations. These new offices will ensure that TAS can continue to meet the needs of taxpayers where they work and live.

FOCUS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2017

In Fiscal Year 2017, TAS will continue to:

- Identify potential new TAS office locations as taxpayer populations and needs continue to shift.

TAS TRAINING INITIATIVES AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IMPROVE ADVOCACY AND TAXPAYER SERVICE

TAS continues to focus on ensuring employees receive ongoing education in protecting taxpayer rights, tax law and procedures, and on how to advocate effectively for taxpayers. Our educational programs are tailored around our occupational tracks to ensure we deliver the right training to the right employees at the right time. TAS has provided technical training workshops during FY 2016 on tax law issues such as Appeals Judicial Approach and Culture, Alternative Dispute Resolution, Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TBOR), Advocating When Working Collection Cases, and the Affordable Care Act. With the focus on advocacy and protecting taxpayer rights, these courses engage employees in the learning process through cases studies, role plays, videos, demonstrations, and group discussions. By using a combination of local face-to-face initiatives with virtual and online training, TAS is able to maximize its training efforts despite its budgetary limitations.¹³

TAS will continue this focus on technical training in FY 2017, and expand our use of external trainers, such as Low Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC) attorneys, Certified Public Accountants, and Enrolled Agents to assist in training TAS employees. By using external trainers who are handling taxpayer cases on a daily basis, we can ensure our employees are aware of not only the technical issues, but understand the taxpayer's perspective and the challenges they face in complying with their tax obligations and understanding the tax laws.

¹² IRS Pub. 1546, *Taxpayer Advocate Service Is Here to Help* (Jan. 2016).

¹³ One example of online training is Lynda.com, a low-cost online video repository of courses available any time, on any device.

FOCUS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2017

In Fiscal Year 2017, TAS will continue to:

- Deliver comprehensive training on Delegated Authorities which increase the ability of all Intake Advocates to identify and resolve technical issues up front. The training will include employment tax training, financial analysis, advocating in fraud-related cases, math-error adjustments, and other technical topics;
- Provide training to TAS employees on the Most Litigated Issues in the National Taxpayer Advocate's Annual Report to Congress to ensure TAS employees are aware of emerging technical issues and advocacy opportunities;
- Use external trainers, including LITC attorneys, Certified Public Accountants, and Enrolled Agents to ensure TAS employees receive a fresh perspective on issues they face when working with taxpayers;
- Incorporate advocacy tips and ways to protect taxpayers' rights into all of our training and development, including a comprehensive writing course detailing how to create case action plans and histories in documentation that captures all advocacy efforts; and
- Offer external training and Continuing Education credits offered through professional societies, such as the American Bar Association, and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants CPE Direct or CPEExpress programs, among others.

TAS REDESIGNS CABIC TOOL TO ENHANCE EMPLOYEES' RESEARCH CAPABILITIES AND IMPROVE SERVICE TO TAXPAYERS

In addition to training, TAS has strengthened the advocacy tools available to its employees to ensure they have accurate and easily accessible information to assist taxpayers as quickly as possible. The Case Advocacy by Issue Code (CABIC) tool allows employees to quickly find sources and references in which to perform research, conduct case building, and aid in accurate Operations Assistance Request routing. The previous CABIC system was difficult to navigate and much of the information was outdated.

In FY 2016, TAS deployed the redesigned CABIC tool that contains links to the latest IRMs and interim guidance, case building and advocacy tools (such as links to TBOR), as well as available technical training materials for specific issue codes. The new CABIC allows Case Advocates to quickly find information they need for their advocacy efforts, reducing the time they spend researching and maximize the time they can spend resolving taxpayer cases. The new CABIC also allows for easier updates, ensuring that the information available to TAS employees is always the most up to date guidance.

FOCUS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2017

In Fiscal Year 2017, TAS will continue to:

- Roll out the redesigned CABIC to the remaining issue codes not included in the initial launch; and
- Update the CABIC with new guidance as it is released to maintain the accuracy of the information available.

TAS REFOCUSES QUALITY STANDARDS TO BETTER GAUGE ADVOCACY EFFECTIVENESS

TAS quality measures gauge its effectiveness in achieving its mission of helping taxpayers resolve problems with the IRS and recommend changes that will prevent the problems. TAS's quality measures are based on our guiding principle of advocacy,¹⁴ official guidance, and statutory requirements.

TAS developed a proposal for revising its quality standards to better align our quality standards with our advocacy mission. The revised standards focus on important aspects such as resolving taxpayer issues, protecting and informing taxpayers of their rights, keeping taxpayers informed and identifying systemic issues that will assist IRS leadership in integrating the taxpayer's perspective into tax administration.

FOCUS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2017

In Fiscal Year 2017, TAS will continue to:

- Implement the revised quality standards; and
- Use the results to increase TAS's effectiveness in advocating for taxpayers by identifying opportunities to improve processes and guidance, make recommendations that will prevent the problems and address employee training needs.

¹⁴ The willingness and ability to see the situation from a taxpayer's perspective, advocate for the taxpayer's rights, and assist IRS leadership in integrating the taxpayer's perspective into tax administration.