

Evolution of the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate

The Office of the Taxpayer Ombudsman was created by the IRS in 1979 to serve as the primary advocate, within the IRS, for taxpayers. This position was codified in the Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TBOR 1), included in the Technical and Miscellaneous Revenue Act of 1988 (TAMRA).¹

In TBOR 1, Congress added IRC § 7811, granting the Ombudsman (now the National Taxpayer Advocate (NTA)) the statutory authority to issue Taxpayer Assistance Orders (TAOs) if, in the determination of the Ombudsman, a taxpayer is suffering or is about to suffer significant hardship because of the way the Internal Revenue laws are being administered by the Secretary.² Further, TBOR 1 directed the Ombudsman and the Assistant Commissioner (Taxpayer Services) to jointly provide an Annual Report to Congress (ARC) about the quality of taxpayer services provided by the IRS. This report was delivered directly to the Senate Committee on Finance and the House Committee on Ways and Means.³

In 1996, the Taxpayer Bill of Rights 2 (TBOR 2) amended IRC § 7802 (the predecessor to IRC § 7803), replacing the Office of the Taxpayer Ombudsman with the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate.⁴ The Joint Committee on Taxation set forth the following reasons for change:

To date, the Taxpayer Ombudsman has been a career civil servant selected by and serving at the pleasure of the IRS Commissioner. Some may perceive that the Taxpayer Ombudsman is not an independent advocate for taxpayers. In order to ensure that the Taxpayer Ombudsman has the necessary stature within the IRS to represent fully the interests of taxpayers, Congress believed it appropriate to elevate the position to a position comparable to that of the Chief Counsel. In addition, in order to ensure that the Congress is systematically made aware of recurring and unresolved problems and difficulties taxpayers encounter in dealing with the IRS, the Taxpayer Ombudsman should have the authority and responsibility to make independent reports to the Congress in order to advise the tax-writing committees of those areas.⁵

In TBOR 2, Congress not only established the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate, but also described its functions:

- To assist taxpayers in resolving problems with the IRS;
- To identify areas in which taxpayers have problems in dealings with the IRS;
- To the extent possible, propose changes in the administrative practices of the IRS to mitigate those identified problems; and
- To identify potential legislative changes which may be appropriate to mitigate such problems.⁶

1 Pub. L. No. 100-647, Title VI, § 6230, 102 Stat. 3342, 3733 (Nov. 10, 1988).

2 *Id.*

3 Pub. L. No. 100-647, Title VI, § 6230, 102 Stat. 3373 (Nov. 10, 1988).

4 Pub. L. No. 104-168, § 101, 110 Stat. 1452, 1453-56 (July 30, 1996).

5 J. Comm. on Tax'n, *General Explanation of Tax Legislation Enacted in the 104th Congress*, JCS-12-96, 20 (Dec. 18, 1996).

6 Pub. L. No. 104-168, § 101(a), 110 Stat. 1452, 1453-54 (July 30, 1996).

Congress did not provide the Taxpayer Advocate with direct line authority over the existing regional and local Problem Resolution Officers (PROs) who handled cases under the Problem Resolution Program, the predecessor to the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate. At the time of the enactment of TBOR 2, Congress believed it sufficient to require that “all PROs should take direction from the Taxpayer Advocate and that they should operate with sufficient independence to assure that taxpayer rights are not being subordinated to pressure from local revenue officers, district directors, etc.”⁷

TBOR 2 also replaced the joint Assistant Commissioner/Taxpayer Advocate Report to Congress with two ARCs issued directly and independently by the Taxpayer Advocate.⁸ The first report, the Objectives Report to Congress, is to contain the objectives of the Taxpayer Advocate for the fiscal year beginning in that calendar year. This report is to provide full and substantive analysis in addition to statistical information and is due no later than June 30 of each calendar year.

The second report, the ARC, is on the activities of the Taxpayer Advocate during the fiscal year ending during that calendar year. Section 7803(c)(2)(B)(ii) of the IRC, as amended by the Taxpayer First Act (TFA), requires the National Taxpayer Advocate to submit this report each year and to include in it, among other things, a description of the ten most serious problems encountered by taxpayers as well as administrative and legislative recommendations to mitigate those problems. Previously, the report was required to contain a description of at least 20 of the most serious problems facing taxpayers. The report must now:

- Identify the initiatives the Taxpayer Advocate has taken to improve taxpayer services and IRS responsiveness;
- Contain recommendations received from individuals who have the authority to issue a TAO;
- Contain a summary of the ten Most Serious Problems (MSPs),⁹ taxpayers have in dealing with the IRS;
- Contain an inventory of initiatives and recommendations for which action has been taken and the resulting action;
- Contain an inventory of initiatives and recommendations for which action has yet to be taken and the period of time these items have been in the inventory;
- Contain an inventory of initiatives and recommendations for which there has been no action, an explanation for the lack of action, and the responsible official;
- Identify any TAO or Taxpayer Advocate Directive (TAD)¹⁰ which was not honored by the IRS in a timely manner;

7 J. Comm. on Tax'n, *General Explanation of Tax Legislation Enacted in the 104th Congress*, JCS-12-96, 21 (Dec. 18, 1996).

8 Pub. L. No. 104-168, § 101(a), 110 Stat. 1452, 1453–54 (July 30, 1996).

9 As originally enacted, TBOR 2 required a summary of at least 20 MSPs. In July 2019, the TFA reduced the number of MSPs to ten. See Pub. L. No. 116-25, § 1301(b)(1), 133 Stat. 981, 992 (July 1, 2019).

10 A TAD mandates that functional areas make certain administrative or procedural changes to improve a process or grant relief to groups of taxpayers (or all taxpayers). TADs are used to protect the rights of taxpayers, prevent undue burden, ensure equitable treatment, or provide an essential service to taxpayers. Internal Revenue Manual 13.2.1.6, Taxpayer Advocate Directives (July 16, 2009).

- Contain recommendations for legislative or administrative action that will resolve taxpayer problems;
- Identify areas of the tax law that impose significant compliance burdens on taxpayers, including specific recommendations for remedy;
- Identify the ten most litigated issues for each category of taxpayers, including recommendations for mitigating such disputes;
- With respect to any statistical information included in such report, include a statement of whether such statistical information was reviewed or provided by the Secretary under IRC § 6108(d) and, if so, whether the Secretary determined such information to be statistically valid and based on sound statistical methodology; and
- Include other such information as the Taxpayer Advocate may deem advisable.

The stated objective of these two reports is “for Congress to receive an unfiltered and candid report of the problems taxpayers are experiencing and what can be done to address them. While both reports are to include statistical information, the TFA created a requirement whereby the National Taxpayer Advocate must coordinate research with the office of the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (TIGTA). The National Taxpayer Advocate is now precluded from reporting statistical information that is included in a TIGTA report.¹¹ The reports by the Taxpayer Advocate are not official legislative recommendations of the Administration; providing official legislative recommendations remains the responsibility of the Department of Treasury.”¹²

Finally, TBOR 2 amended IRC § 7811, extending the scope of a TAO, by providing the Taxpayer Advocate “with broader authority to affirmatively take any action as permitted by law with respect to taxpayers who would otherwise suffer a significant hardship as a result of the manner in which the IRS is administering the tax laws.”¹³ For the first time, the TAO could specify a time period within which the IRS must act on the order. The statute also provided that only the Taxpayer Advocate, the IRS Commissioner, or the Deputy Commissioner could modify or rescind a TAO, and that any official who so modifies or rescinds a TAO must respond in writing to the Taxpayer Advocate with his or her reasons for such action.¹⁴

11 IRC § 7803(c)(2)(B)(iv).

12 J. Comm. on Tax'n, *General Explanation of Tax Legislation Enacted in the 104th Congress*, JCS-12-96, 21 (Dec. 18, 1996).

13 *Id.*

14 Pub. L. No. 104-168, § 102(b), 110 Stat. 1452, 1456 (July 30, 1996).

In 1997, the National Commission on Restructuring the Internal Revenue Service called the Taxpayer Advocate the “voice of the taxpayer.” In its discussion of the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate, the Commission noted:

Taxpayer Advocates play an important role and are essential for the protection of taxpayer rights and to promote taxpayer confidence in the integrity and accountability of the IRS. To succeed, the Advocate must be viewed, both in perception and reality, as an independent voice for the taxpayer within the IRS. Currently, the [N]ational Taxpayer Advocate is not viewed as independent by many in Congress. This view is based in part on the placement of the Advocate within the IRS and the fact that only career employees have been chosen to fill the position.¹⁵

In response to these concerns, in the IRS Restructuring and Reform Act of 1998 (RRA 98), Congress amended IRC § 7803(c), renaming the Taxpayer Advocate as the National Taxpayer Advocate and mandating that the National Taxpayer Advocate could not be an officer or an employee of the IRS for two years preceding or five years following his or her tenure as the National Taxpayer Advocate (service as an employee of the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate is not considered IRS employment under this provision).¹⁶

RRA 98 provided for Local Taxpayer Advocates (LTAs) to be located in each state and mandated a reporting structure for LTAs to report directly to the National Taxpayer Advocate.¹⁷ As indicated in IRC § 7803(c)(4)(B), each LTA must have a phone, fax, electronic communication, and mailing address separate from those of the IRS. The LTA must advise taxpayers at their first meeting of the fact that “the taxpayer advocate offices operate independently of any other Internal Revenue Service office and report directly to Congress through the National Taxpayer Advocate.”¹⁸

Congress also granted the LTAs discretion to not disclose to the IRS the fact that the taxpayer contacted the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate or any information provided by the taxpayer to that office.¹⁹ RRA 98 also expanded the definition of “significant hardship” in IRC § 7811 to include four specific circumstances:

1. An immediate threat of adverse action;
2. A delay of more than 30 days in resolving taxpayer account problems;
3. The incurring by the taxpayer of significant costs (including fees for professional representation) if relief is not granted; or
4. Irreparable injury to, or a long-term adverse impact on, the taxpayer if relief is not granted.²⁰

15 Report of the National Commission on Restructuring the Internal Revenue Service, *A Vision for a New IRS*, 48 (June 25, 1997).

16 Pub. L. No. 105-206, § 1102(a), 112 Stat. 685, 699 (July 22, 1998).

17 *Id.* at 701.

18 IRC § 7803(c)(4)(A)(iii).

19 IRC § 7803(c)(4)(A)(iv).

20 IRC § 7811(a)(2).

The Committee Reports make clear that this list is a non-exclusive list of what constitutes a significant hardship.²¹

Prior to 2011, Treasury Regulation § 301.7811-1 had not been updated since it was first published in 1992. Consequently, after Congress expanded the definition of “significant hardship” in the statute in 1998, the definition in the regulation was inconsistent. However, on April 1, 2011, the IRS published in the Federal Register final regulations under IRC § 7811 that contain a definition of significant hardship consistent with existing law and practice.²²

The National Taxpayer Advocate has long since advocated that the IRS establish a TBOR. In June 2014, the IRS finally adopted the Taxpayer Bill of Rights — a set of ten fundamental rights that taxpayers should be aware of when dealing with the IRS.²³ One of those ten rights is the *right to a fair and just tax system*, which gives taxpayers the right to receive assistance from the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate if they are experiencing financial difficulty or if the IRS has not resolved their tax issues properly and timely through its normal channels. In December 2015, Congress enacted IRC § 7803(a)(3), which requires the Commissioner to ensure that employees of the IRS are familiar with and act in accord with taxpayer rights, including the *right to a fair and just tax system*.²⁴

The passing of the TFA in July 2019 also codified the timeframes surrounding issuance of TADs. Now, the IRS must respond to a TAD no later than 90 days after its issuance.²⁵ If the IRS decides to modify or rescind the TAD, the National Taxpayer Advocate may appeal that decision to the Commissioner of the IRS within 90 days. The Commissioner then has 90 days to either ensure compliance with the TAD or provide reasons to the National Taxpayer Advocate for the modification or rescission of the TAD. Additionally, the National Taxpayer Advocate must report on any TADs that were not honored in a timely manner in the ARC.²⁶

21 See, e.g., H.R. REP. No. 105-599, at 215 (1998) (Conf. Rep.).

22 Treas. Reg. § 301.7811-1(a)(4)(ii); 76 Fed. Reg. 18,059, 18,060-61 (Apr. 1, 2011).

23 See IR-2014-72 (June 10, 2014).

24 See Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2016, Pub. L. No. 114-113, Division Q, § 401, 129 Stat. 2242, 3117 (Dec. 18, 2015).

25 IRC § 7803(c)(5)(A).

26 IRC § 7803(c)(2)(B)(viii).