

Executive Summary

The Taxpayer Advocate Office was established by the 2021 Oregon Legislature's House Bill 3373, which went into effect on January 1, 2022. Codi Trudell was appointed the first Taxpayer Advocate, with the rest of the office comprising a bilingual public service representative to provide customer support and a research analyst to analyze complex cases and maintain records of taxpayer inquiries.

ORS 305.800-803 describes the role and responsibilities of the Oregon Department of Revenue Taxpayer Advocate. Their main functions are to assist taxpayers in obtaining information, evaluate complaints, identify barriers to equitable service, service taxpayers whose issues are not resolved through normal channels, and represent taxpayers' interests in policymaking. The Taxpayer Advocate Office therefore serves as a centralized point of contact for identifying, assisting with, and reporting systemic issues which the DOR can address internally, reducing barriers to compliance and increasing accountability to taxpayers within the DOR.

The Taxpayer Advocate Office fielded 687 inquiries in calendar year 2022, with 66 of these being elevated to cases and allotted additional resources to resolve. Of those cases, 25% resulted in a process change that could prevent similar issues. No cases required taxpayer assistance orders to compel the DOR to act in a taxpayer's case. In addition to serving individual taxpayers, outreach to small businesses and community groups as well as partnerships with economic development organizations serving American Indian groups (e.g., Economic Development & Community Services Tribal Cluster), low-income working families (e.g., MFS-CASH Oregon), and rural communities (e.g., Ford Family Foundation) form a key part of the office's activities and shape its advocacy.

Systemic issues were identified by tracking repeated patterns in cases, and solutions were proposed for issues in customer service, refund check forgery, returned mail, and settlement offers. The Taxpayer Advocate also issued several recommendations as part of the 2023 biennial report. In the area of customer service, the return refund process should be evaluated to give taxpayers more specific information and meet timelines more effectively. Inquiries should be categorized and assigned to staff equipped with skills and information to assist, and staff should be cross-trained to strengthen their ability to answer customer questions. Providing resources for taxpayers to better understand property tax and small business taxes is also recommended, including providing small business-specific training and assistance. Lastly, the DOR should improve systems and forms for authorizing taxpayers' representatives and sending copies of notices to such representatives.

The program's inaugural year has enhanced the services to taxpayers and created opportunities for the DOR to proactively connect with taxpayers and form collaborative partnerships with community-based organizations. The taxpayer has been given a voice within the agency through these efforts, and the DOR has undergone changes which are expected to increase system equity and voluntary compliance.