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Tampa Bay Taxpayers Caught in Identity Theft Scam

Tampa Bay taxpayers cried foul when dozens of their tax returns were rejected by the system because they had already been submitted by someone else. This is a typical case of identity theft where someone else uses your name and Social Security number to submit a tax return and obtain a refund.

One such victimized taxpayer, Asmina Mobley, a new mother who filed her tax returns with her husband, discovered that someone else had filed using her name just the day before. She is still waiting for her real tax refund.

The IRS confirmed that the fraudulent practice of identity theft is prevalent and is on the rise of late. In a recent email statement to News Channel 8, the IRS stated, “Unfortunately we are seeing an increase in identity theft cases, including more complex and sophisticated schemes”. And this comes despite the best efforts of the IRS to curtail this trend. According to the agency, it has stopped nearly 117,000 identity theft returns and protected ‘more than \$582 million from going into the wrong hands’ this year.

Also to be applauded are the efforts of other parties in combating the scourge of identity theft. Letter carriers in local neighborhoods are flagging suspected fraudulent refund checks and debit cards and returning them to their supervisors. These letter carriers knowing their neighborhoods well are able to identify anything that may look out-of-the-ordinary, like checks paid to an unfamiliar name going to a home in their route.

Tampa Postal Inspector Doug Smith said, "Our job is to take criminal misuse out of the mail, things that don't belong in the mail, people who use the mail for criminal purpose. It's our job to weed that stuff out". However, Smith did not disclose details of the amount of suspected fraudulent items the postal service comes across. Postal officials say they cannot comment more on the issue because of ongoing investigations by the IRS and the postal inspector's office. But Smith did confirm that when they detect a suspected tax-related item, they would contact the IRS who would then pick them up.

Though the IRS said it stops 'the vast majority of fraudulent refund claims,' the agency did not disclose how much money was paid out under fraudulent claims. But the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office says it forwarded 97 complaints to the Internal Revenue Service recently.

The problem has come to the attention of Florida's Senator Bill Nelson who said he intends to hold a hearing with the financial responsibilities subcommittee on the issue.