

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Senate Committee on Finance Spotlighting IRS Customer Service Challenges

Witnesses: Ms. Erin M. Collins, National Taxpayer Advocate (Internal Revenue Service); Ms. Jessica Lucas-Judy, Director, Strategic Issues (United States Government Accountability Office); and Ms. Jan Lewis, Chair, Tax Executive Committee (American Institute of Certified Public Accountants).

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[\[AUDIO\]](#) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

Cantwell: Mr. Chairman, thank you. And thank you to the ranking member. I join my Northwest colleagues in technology update, technology update, technology update. We say this because we saw what happened last year with our constituents trying to get answers, and so what was it? One in nine, actually, were able to get through to the IRS as far as calls. So we believe that that focus, and if you've talked to your accountant, this tax season, you can see the complexity and the letters they're sending out if you have an accountant. And if you don't have an accountant, the complexity is amazing. So there's lots to discuss, and people need answers.

So one issue, the IRS is piloting its use of online chat features. But right now, it's limiting it to resolving collection notices. It's not been expanded to allow taxpayers to chat with customer service representatives about tax questions. In 2019 a GAO study compared the IRS online communication capabilities with other nations and found that taxpayers in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, were able to securely chat online with tax agencies to get answers to their questions. So we need, I think, California and Alabama also have revenue agencies that offer similar chat functionality. So, as we look at increasing the funding for the IRS to invest in the agency's technology workforce, what Ms. Lucas-Judy, as part of that GAO study, you know, are you guys resisting this? What is the review of this process? What can we do to get this online communication support system in place for our constituents?

Lucas-Judy: One of the challenges there was in security, trying to make sure that the function is sufficiently secure, to be able to protect sensitive taxpayer information. We know that, as you mentioned, there are other places that have been able to put such a function in place. That's something that the IRS has been looking at and testing. And we're continuing to follow up with them. One of our recommendations to them from that report was that they better integrates taxpayer needs, making sure they're putting functions out there and systems out there and prioritizing things that taxpayers actually want and will use and not and not just things that are sort of, you know, easy to do.

Cantwell: But you're saying that you use it for online chat for collection, the IRS uses it, is that, do I have that right? Right. Okay, so you're using it to talk to taxpayers about sensitive tax information, like 'please, you know, pay your bill.' Okay, but you don't want to use it to allow them to communicate to you about 'listen, how do I do this? And this and this?'

Lucas-Judy: That is something that that GAO has heard that IRS is working on expanding and as part of its taxpayer experience strategy, it is one of the functions that they're trying to expand.

Cantwell: Are you supportive of that?

Lucas-Judy: We're supportive of anything that that can protect taxpayer information, but provide better customer service.

Cantwell: Okay, I'm just confused. Because do you think that there's not taxpayer information being discussed when you call them in an online chat for collection?

Lucas-Judy: I have not reviewed that. So I'm not sure. I mean, I would assume that there is.

Cantwell: I just think that we have to think about where our constituents are and so if you're using one technology to basically call them and use that as a communication tool, but then they have questions and they want to talk to you saying we don't know whether it's secure. So I think the issue is that countries around the globe are using it because it is secure.

Maybe, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, we need to look at how to upgrade the security technology of the IRS. I'm not saying that there aren't real security issues, for sure, but at the same time, I think this one in nine calls being answered during tax season is just not acceptable. And we have to figure it out, we talked obviously with our own little IRS commissioner about the surge capacity the IRS uses but that's not enough. We've got to get into the 21st century here with this level of communication. Thank you Mr. Chairman.