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Blind Taxpayers Sue the IRS

Print-only Notices Result in Financial Penalties for Blind Taxpayers

San Francisco (July 25, 2019): Berkeley businesswoman Karen Rose, who is blind, was about to throw away what she thought was junk mail when a friend noticed that it was from the IRS. It turned out to be a second notice that she owed nearly \$25,000 in additional taxes. When she contacted the agency, she learned that she had also incurred an additional \$1,500 in interest and penalties because she hadn't responded to the first notice. A representative from an IRS Taxpayer Assistance Center helped her appeal the penalties when Karen explained that she couldn't read the printed letters. The appeal was denied. She has since received a check for \$77 from the agency but has heard nothing about the request she made to receive future notices in Braille or another alternative format.

Ms. Rose and two other blind taxpayers who had similar experiences, along with the National Federation of the Blind, are suing the IRS for not providing notices in alternative formats such as Braille, large print, electronic documents, or audio. They are represented by attorneys from the Baltimore law firm of Brown, Goldstein & Levy LLP and Disability Rights California, the protection and advocacy system for the state. The suit, filed in the US District Court for the Northern District of California, San Francisco Division, alleges that the IRS policy of only communicating with taxpayers via hard-copy, standard-print letters violates Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

"Over forty-five years ago, Congress told federal and state governments that they must make their programs accessible to blind people, including providing information in alternative formats like Braille and audio," said Mark Riccobono, President of the National Federation of the Blind.

"Today's technology makes accessible communication easier than ever, but the IRS still isn't meeting its legal and moral obligations to blind taxpayers, and this sometimes results in penalties and other hardships. We are determined to force this powerful agency to treat blind taxpayers equally as required by law."

"It's never too late to do the right thing. Through this case, the IRS now has a chance to hear from people who would willingly pay their fair share of taxes but cannot access the IRS's current print-only notice system," said Autumn Elliot, senior counsel, Disability Rights California.

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About the National Federation of the Blind

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB), headquartered in Baltimore, is the oldest and largest nationwide organization of blind Americans. Founded in 1940, the NFB consists of affiliates, chapters, and divisions in the fifty states, Washington DC, and Puerto Rico. The NFB defends the rights of blind people of all ages and provides information and support to families with blind children, older Americans who are losing vision, and more. We believe in the hopes and dreams of blind people and work together to transform them into reality. Learn more about our many programs and initiatives at www.nfb.org.

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About Disability Rights California (DRC)

Disability Rights California is a non-profit organization founded in 1978. We protect the rights of people with disabilities. For more information, visit www.disabilityrightsca.org.

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