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## The Scary Truth About Ghost Tax Preparers

*Promising big refunds or not signing client tax returns are some of the most common red flags.*

**Sacramento, CA (March 21, 2024)**—It is a problem that continues to haunt taxpayers each year. Self-proclaimed “professional” tax preparers who lure taxpayers in with low fees, often touting big and fast tax refunds, then disappear right after the tax filing deadline hits the stroke of midnight.

“We call them ghost tax preparers. They never sign client tax returns so it makes it very difficult for enforcement teams to find them, which is, of course, their intention. Not signing is also against the law,” said Lester Crawford, chair of the [California Tax Education Council \(CTEC\)](#), a state-mandated nonprofit organization that manages the registration of 40,000 tax preparers.

Here’s how ghost tax preparers work. They print out tax returns for clients, tell them to sign and mail it out. What many taxpayers fail to notice is the tax return will not show the tax preparer’s signature. For electronically filed tax returns, their name is also left out. These tax returns are filed as “self-prepared.”

“A lot of them move from one city to another every year and reestablish their client base through word of mouth,” said Fernando Angell, CTEC board member. “It’s senseless and targeted misconduct.”

Other typical scams include...

- Sticking a business label on the tax return instead of signing it. Clients get the label copy so it looks as though they signed it; however, a blank copy without a business label is filed.
- Claim they “forgot” to sign the tax return and promise to sign “later” after payment is received.
- Require payment in cash and not provide a receipt.
- Invent income to qualify their clients for tax credits.
- Claim fake deductions to falsely boost the size of the refund.
- Direct refunds to their bank account instead of the taxpayer’s account.

“One client I helped had a ghost tax preparer block their calls after getting notices from the IRS,” Angell said.

California is one of the few states that has set requirements for tax professionals. State law requires anyone who prepares tax returns for a fee must be either an [attorney](#), [certified public accountant \(CPA\)](#), [CTEC-registered tax preparer \(CRTP\)](#) or [enrolled agent \(EA\)](#). Taxpayers can submit anonymous reports about questionable tax preparers to [CTEC.org](#). Taxpayers can get more tips on the podcast [taxpayerbeware.org](#), also available in Spanish at [contribuyentecudese.org](#).

CTEC is a nonprofit organization that was established in 1997 by the California State Legislature to protect taxpayers against fraudulent and incompetent tax preparers.

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