

Information for IRS Approved Continuing Education Providers
Provided via conference call September 14, 16, 22, 24, 2015

2016 Provider renewal process (refer to screenshot)

- You should review your list of currently approved programs prior to beginning the renewal process to determine which programs you plan to carry forward to 2016 and which ones need updates to ensure content is current (generally tax update programs).
- You can export your list of currently approved programs to Excel from the link on your [provider home page](#) in the “currently approved programs” section.
- As you are going through the renewal process, check any auto filled information carefully to ensure that the information is still correct, especially the Point of Contact (POC) information and email address.
- The only major change this year is that existing Enrolled Agent Special Enrollment Exam (SEE) Test Preparation programs cannot be carried forward into 2016. If you want to offer an EA SEE test prep program in 2016, you must add the program(s) according to specific guidelines that will be discussed later.
- You must make a determination for EACH individual program in your account. Options include carrying the program forward to 2016, revising it, or no longer offering it.
- Annual Federal Tax Refresher (AFTR) courses will not show up in your program grid to renew. The AFTR course outline changes each year and you MUST get a new program number each year beginning May 1. For 2016, the course outline should be available to providers in the Spring of 2016.
- Do not carry over programs you do not intend to offer/sell in 2016. Doing so creates an inflated number of programs that are available to the return preparer community. Carefully consider whether you actually need to retain each program for 2016.
- Some providers put a placeholder program in because they don’t have their programs for 2016 developed at the time of renewal. If you do this, make sure to delete the placeholder whenever you add your programs.
- If a program’s content has changed, you should elect to “edit” the program and update the description/information. This will result in receiving a new program number, which is appropriate because with content change it would no longer be considered the same program.
- If there are only minor inflationary amounts that change, you do not need to edit the program.
- If you’re not sure if you will be offering/selling a program in 2016, you can carry it forward, but please delete it once you determine it is no longer needed and all PTINs have been reported.
- If you elect to “continue using” a program, which means “as is” and have no changes to content, it will retain its original program number.
- If you still need to report PTINs for a program in 2016, retain the program. The system requires a program be included in your list of currently approved programs in your account in order to accept completion dates during the current year.
- If all PTINs have been uploaded and you will not be offering the program nor submitting PTINs in 2016, you can safely delete that program.
- Remember to carry over any programs you have sold/offered to students to complete in 2016, even if you are no longer offering to new students in 2016. Generally, these are self-study programs where the student was given six months to a year to complete the program, which would cause the need for it to be reported in 2016.

- If you are adding new programs during renewal, you can only add them for 2016. If you'd like to add a 2015 program to be given Oct – Dec 2015 you will need to come back in to your account after you renew and you will then have the opportunity to select from a drop down menu whether it's a 2015 or 2016 program, or "both".
- Upon successful renewal and payment, your renewal letter will be placed in your secure mailbox and your information will continue to be on the [IRS Approved CE provider public listing](#) (unless you selected to not be on the listing).
- If you experience any issues or need assistance with the renewal process, please contact the CE provider help desk at 855-296-3150 between 9:00 am and 6:00 pm ET.

[Update on Annual Filing Season Program](#)

- We will not conduct a 100% review of AFTR providers this year.
- If you are selected for an informal review of your AFTR course, please be responsive when we reach out to you. This will expedite the informal review and will allow us to provide timely feedback to you regarding your AFTR course/test and any improvements that might be necessary.
- If we make recommendations regarding your AFTR course and/or test, take an appropriate amount of time to incorporate any recommendations. It is best if you only submit one corrected revision to us.
- Listed below are suggestions for developing your AFTR course material and exam.
 1. We placed an email into your CE account's secure mailbox on April 1 titled "Annual Filing Season Program welcome package". Ensure you read this email.
 2. The welcome package included information regarding Schedule C and the Affordable Care Act. These topics are not listed on the [AFTR course outline](#) itself, but need to be covered on the AFTR course and [test](#).
 3. Also included in the welcome package is a link to the AFTR Course Outline reconciliation form, which allows you to easily show the page number or the PowerPoint slide where each topic to be addressed. Feedback from providers has been positive about this form. We recommend you complete the reconciliation form twice – once for the course material and a second time for your test. Remember you must address all topics on the course outline in your course material and have at least one question for each topic in the final exam. This reconciliation form also helps us expedite your informal review.
 4. If your AFTR course is a self-study delivery method, be sure to document that the material justifies 6 hours of CE credit by using either the [Word Count Formula](#) or pilot testing. A link to a Word Count Formula PDF document is also included in the welcome package. Please note: (1) If you choose to use review questions, limit review questions to 3 per credit hour; (2) no final exam questions are allowed in the calculation – which is a departure from non AFTR programs; and (3) exclude introductory material, table of contents, appendices, glossaries, and other materials that are not critical to the achievement of the stated learning objectives for the AFTR course. Additional information can be found on page 2 of the Word Count Formula document.

5. We suggest you communicate tax extenders from last year that expired at the beginning of this year, cover those known issues Congress is expected to address as tax extenders later this year, and inform your students you will provide an email, newsletter or a link to a tax extender web page on your website which will cover the tax extenders passed by Congress.

Here's a little more information about tax extenders.

The Senate Finance Committee (as of July 21, 2015) passed a tax extenders bill which would extend some legislation through 2015. These are the main items that were extended through 2014 and will need to be extended again for 2015 (#3 on AFTR course outline in Domain 1):

- Expenses of elementary and secondary school teachers
- Exclusion of imputed income from the discharge of indebtedness for a principal residence
- The equalization of the tax exclusion for employer-provided commuter transit and parking benefits
- The tax deduction of mortgage insurance premiums
- Deduction for state/local general sales taxes in lieu of state/local income taxes
- Deduction of contributions of real property interests for conservation purposes
- Deduction of qualified tuition and related expenses
- Tax exemption of distributions from IRA accounts for charitable purposes
- R&D tax credit

The extenders above expired 12/31/2014, so as a provider, you will need to pay attention and watch legislation to see if Congress extends them again for this year. Please be cautious when teaching this topic as well as the questions you include in your AFTR exam.

Remember, the filing deadline for next year is April 18th due to the Emancipation Day holiday in Washington D.C. Domain 1 Topic #4 of the AFTR Course Outline is "Review of tax return due dates, including extensions".

Regarding the regulations for tangible property (dubbed the "repair regs"), these were really effective for 2014. There was additional guidance issued in early 2015, but it was for returns for 2014 and on.

6. Please note that New York has been removed from our list of [AFTR Course Exempt Preparers](#) as the state is still developing their test. Once we understand their schedule, we will decide whether we will allow an exemption for their test for the 2016 AFSP.
7. We would like to remind you of two important dates regarding the Annual Filing Season Program.
 - a. December 31 is the deadline for non-exempt preparers to successfully pass the AFTR course. December 31 is also the deadline for all preparers, exempt and non-exempt, seeking the AFSP Record of Completion to complete the appropriate amount of continuing education required.

- b. April 15, 2016 is the deadline for preparers to sign sub-part B and Section 10.51 of Circular 230 which generates the AFSP Record of Completion and inclusion in the Directory of Federal Tax Return Preparers with Credentials and Select Qualifications.

Enrolled Agent Special Enrollment Exam test preparation programs

- As mentioned above, you cannot carry Enrolled Agent Special Enrollment Exam (SEE) Test Preparation programs forward during renewal. If you want to offer an EA SEE test prep program in 2016, you will need to add the program(s) according to specific guidelines. These directions can be found in your CE account's secure mailbox (message delivered on July 24) or refer to [FAQ 6 under Program/Course Guidance](#).
- Tax return preparers may earn up to ten hours of federal tax continuing education credit for Parts 1 and 2, plus two credit hours of ethics for prep for Part 3. The maximum amount for SEE prep programs is now 12 credit hours total.

Avoiding and handling incomplete program numbers (see screenshot)

A valid program number contains 14 alpha/numeric characters along with some dashes. The first 5 alpha/numeric characters are your provider number, which stays the same on all your programs. Following a dash, the next alpha character is the program category (E= Ethics, T= Federal Tax, U=Federal Tax Update, Q = Qualified Retirement Plan Matters, P= Enrolled Agent Special Enrollment Exam Test Prep, A= Annual Federal Tax Refresher). Following another dash are five more numbers, which are the unique program number. The last two numbers are the year the program is approved. The last alpha character is the delivery method of the program (S = self-study, I = in person, O = online).

We are aware of an issue within the CE system where incomplete numbers are sometimes being generated. This may be caused by the system timing you out after a certain amount of time of inactivity. Sometimes this occurs on a different window than the one you are working on so you are not even aware that the system timed out. If you are spending quite a bit of time adding programs, you should go back to the CE system log-in window to see if you have received the pop up telling you the system is going to timeout. If you see it, select "ok" and go back to the window you were working. This may help to eliminate incomplete program numbers.

To make sure you have correct program numbers, any time you add a program, check either the approval/renewal letter in your secure mailbox or look at the current listing of programs on your provider account home page to ensure they have all of the 14 characters described above. The incomplete numbers tend to be missing the five numbers in the center that are the unique program number.

If you notice an incomplete number, you can delete that program and add a new one or you can contact the CE Provider Help Desk at 855-296-3150 for assistance.

Hot topics

- **Revisit rules for acceptable IRS programs (i.e. wealth management, social security and Medicare)**

We have noticed that some program offerings are not qualifying programs for IRS continuing education credit. Examples of these types of programs include personal finance, wealth management, Social Security and Medicare, and also state tax issue or update programs. We understand that these topics are important; however, in order to qualify as an IRS-approved program, you should follow the 80/20 rule. That rule requires that 80% of the program material be related to federal tax in order to qualify for continuing education credit. Just because some of these topics may qualify for CPAs, it needs to meet IRS requirements. Those of you that support CPA courses will want to pay particular attention to this issue as, per Circular 230, Section 10.9; programs that qualify for IRS credit are very specifically related to federal tax/ethics.

Some providers have voiced your concerns about presenting the same ethics topics every year since Circular 230 is updated infrequently. Our recommendation is to offer alternatives such as: (1) EITC due diligence; (2) preparer penalties; and (3) common ethical dilemmas tax preparers face on a daily basis. Keep in mind that any ethics topics presented need to be related to Circular 230.

If you are unsure if a program would qualify, you may contact our RPO mailbox at rpo.ce@irs.gov. Our staff members are always available to answer your questions.

- **PTIN Uploads – requirements and timeframes**

Per [IRS Approved CE Provider Standard No. 14](#), as an IRS approved provider, you must [report PTIN data](#) for everyone who takes your program(s) and provides you with their PTIN, regardless of their designation. It is the responsibility of the participant to provide you with their correct PTIN.

During the first nine months of the year, you must report program completion information quarterly at a minimum (by March 31, June 30, and September 30). During the fourth quarter (October 1 –December 31), you must report program completion information within ten business days of delivery of each program.

It is very important that you upload CE records timely for the participants to have correct CE records in their PTIN accounts for eligibility for the Annual Filing Season Program Record of Completion.

Make sure the completion date you enter into the CE system is the date the participant completed your program and matches the certificate of completion you issued them.

Just a special note - Annual Federal Tax Refresher course completion information can only be submitted with completion dates of July 1 through December 31 of the current year.

- **IRS Tax Forums target Enrolled Agents, Annual Filing Season Program (AFSP) participants and other Return Preparers (RP)**

Each summer the IRS hosts a number of Nationwide Tax Forums. Although the AFSP Annual Federal Tax Refresher (AFTR) course/test is not offered by the IRS at the events, other programs that are offered during the Tax Forum qualify as credit for Enrolled Agents and AFSP participants. Attorneys and CPAs should consult with their respective state licensing agency regarding acceptability of tax forum credits.

The same applies to your non-AFTR courses. Your other CE programs can still be used by participants to earn the additional 12 hours for the AFSP (or the entire 15 hours if the preparer is not required to take the AFTR course/test).

- **Point of contact reminders**

Too often we encounter problems reaching provider points of contact. For example, some telephone numbers are a general company number with no extension and not a direct number to the POC's desk. If you have an extension, please include it in the extension field. If we leave a message, please respond expeditiously. Also ensure your contact information, including e-mail address, is current in your CE provider account. Select "Update Account" on your provider home page to update any information.)

If there is a change in POC, you should contact the CE help desk at 855-296-3150 to get a new userid and password.

- **Providers should monitor early exits**

Continuing education credit is only given for full contact hours. A contact hour is 50 minutes, excluding breaks, lunch and introductions. Participants should only receive credit for the full contact hours they attend a program. For example, if a participant only attends 6 hours of an 8 hour in-person program, their certificate of completion should reflect 6 credit hours, not eight. A provider should only report 6 credit hours to IRS. If your certificates of completion are pre-printed and someone leaves early, then you should not issue the certificate to the preparer at that time, but create a correct certificate and issue at a later date. The hours reported by you and the certificate provided the participant should always match.

- **Updated PTIN listings via FOIA request**

Some providers have asked for information related to PTIN FOIA requests and the frequency of the files being updated. PTIN listings for FOIA requests are run in March, June, Sept, and Dec. PTIN information is updated quarterly, but by the time IRS pulls the data, it's actually the following month before it's ready to be sent out. You may want to specify the particular quarter you want in your request and indicate you're willing to wait (Sept would be received in Oct).

- NASBA is supporting nano learning, which is a small, ten minute session of refresher learning. Currently Ohio and Maryland accept nano learning for CPE credits. IRS is going to be watching to gain experience from NASBA on this, but will not currently accept any nano course for credit.