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With the start of the 2020 tax filing season near, the Internal Revenue Service is reminding taxpayers to avoid unethical “ghost” tax return preparers.

According to the IRS, a ghost preparer does not sign a tax return they prepare. Unscrupulous ghost preparers will print the return and tell the taxpayer to sign and mail it to the IRS. For e-filed returns, the ghost will prepare but refuse to digitally sign as the paid preparer.

By law, anyone who is paid to prepare or assists in preparing federal tax returns must have a valid [Preparer Tax Identification Number](#), or PTIN. Paid preparers must sign and include their PTIN on the return. Not signing a return is a red flag that the paid

preparer may be looking to make a fast buck by promising a big refund or charging

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The IRS urges taxpayers to choose a tax return preparer wisely. The [Choosing a Tax Professional](#) page on IRS.gov has information about tax preparer [credentials and qualifications](#). The IRS [Directory](#) of Federal Tax Return Preparers with Credentials and Select Qualifications can help identify many preparers by type of credential or qualification. To be safest, use a tax professional with the CPA, EA or NATP credentials.

Free basic income tax return preparation with e-file is available to qualified individuals from IRS-certified volunteers at Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) and Tax Counseling for the Elderly (TCE) sites across the country. For more information and to find the closest visit [Free Tax Return Preparation for Qualifying Taxpayers](#) on IRS.gov

No matter who prepares the return, the IRS urges taxpayers to review it carefully and ask questions about anything not clear before signing. Taxpayers should verify both their routing and bank account number on the completed tax return for any direct deposit refund. And taxpayers should watch out for ghost preparers inserting their bank account information onto the returns.

Taxpayers can report preparer misconduct to the IRS using IRS [Form 14157](#), Complaint: Tax Return Preparer. If a taxpayer suspects a tax preparer filed or changed their tax return without their consent, they should file [Form 14157-A](#), Tax Return Preparer Fraud or Misconduct Affidavit.

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