



Focus on Financial Freedom

Maintaining Your Financial Health

Due Date Approaches for 2017 Federal Income Tax Returns

Dolan Financial Services

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Tax filing season is here again. If you haven't done so already, you'll want to start pulling things together — that includes getting your hands on a copy of your 2016 tax return and gathering W-2s, 1099s, and

IRS believes that your estimate was not reasonable, it may void your extension.

Note: *Special rules apply if you're living outside the country or serving in the military and on duty outside the United States. In these circumstances you are generally allowed an automatic two-month extension (to June 15, 2018) without filing Form 4868, though interest will be owed on any taxes due that are paid after April 17. If you served in a combat zone or qualified hazardous duty area, you may be eligible for a longer extension of time to file.*

deduction records. You'll need these records whether you're preparing your own return or paying someone else to prepare your tax return for you.

What if you owe?

One of the biggest mistakes you can make is not filing your return because you owe money. If your return shows a balance due, file and pay the amount due in full by the due date if possible. If there's no way that you can pay what you owe, file the return and pay as much as you can afford. You'll owe interest and possibly penalties on the unpaid tax, but you'll limit the penalties assessed by filing your return on time, and you may be able to work with the IRS to pay the remaining balance (options can include paying the unpaid balance in installments).

Don't procrastinate

The filing deadline for most individuals is Tuesday, April 17, 2018. That's because April 15 falls on a Sunday, and Emancipation Day, a legal holiday in Washington, D.C., is celebrated on Monday, April 16. Unlike in some years, there's no extra time for residents of Massachusetts or Maine to file because Patriots' Day (a holiday in those two states) falls on April 16 — the same day that Emancipation Day is being celebrated.

Expecting a refund?

The IRS is stepping up efforts to combat identity theft and tax refund fraud. New, more aggressive filters that are intended to curtail fraudulent refunds may inadvertently delay some legitimate refund requests. In fact, since last year's tax filing season, the IRS has been required to hold refunds on all tax returns claiming the earned income tax credit or the refundable portion of the child tax credit until at least February 15.¹

Filing for an extension

If you don't think you're going to be able to file your federal income tax return by the due date, you can file for and obtain an extension using IRS Form 4868, Application for Automatic Extension of Time to File U.S. Individual Income Tax Return. Filing this extension gives you an additional six months (to October 15, 2018) to file your federal income tax return. You can also file for an extension electronically — instructions on how to do so can be found in the Form 4868 instructions.

Most filers, though, can expect a refund check to be issued within 21 days of the IRS receiving a return.

Filing for an automatic extension does not provide any additional time to pay your tax. When you file for an extension, you have to estimate the amount of tax you will owe and pay this amount by the April filing due date. If you don't pay the amount you've estimated, you may owe interest and penalties. In fact, if the

¹ IRS.gov (IR-2017-181, IRS Encourages Taxpayers to Check Their Withholding; Checking Now Helps Avoid Surprises at Tax Time, October 30, 2017)

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Four Tips for Downsizing in Retirement

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Four Tips for Downsizing in Retirement



Have you considered downsizing in retirement?

Going through years of accumulated possessions and memories is probably not how you envisioned spending part of your retirement. It may sound like a daunting and emotionally draining task, but downsizing could be a savvy financial move, especially if you haven't reached your retirement savings goals.

1. Set goals for downsizing

Before you make any decisions, think about why you might want to downsize in the first place. Is it because you want to save on mortgage payments or other monthly expenses? Or are you looking to free up some cash to help pursue your lifestyle goals in retirement?

No matter what your specific goals may be, understanding the connection between them and downsizing can help motivate you to follow through with it.

2. Determine the best time to downsize

It's said that timing is everything, so choosing when to downsize will be an important decision to make. One benefit of downsizing early in retirement is that mortgage payments and other related expenses (such as utilities and real estate taxes) could decrease, presuming that you are downsizing to a less expensive residence. This could mean you have extra funds to pursue new hobbies and activities right away in retirement. You might even be fortunate enough to have sufficient funds from the sale of a larger home to pay for a smaller home with cash, thus eliminating or decreasing your mortgage payment, or significantly increasing cash flow.

But there may be advantages to delaying downsizing. If you wait to do it later in retirement, you might have a better sense of just how much you need to downsize to support your current lifestyle. Plus, timing your downsizing plans with a stronger real estate market could mean that you sell and/or purchase a new home at a more opportune time.

3. Be realistic about costs

There are several costs to think about if you are downsizing your home: the worth of your current home, the cost of a new home, and the fees and expenses associated with relocating. Before you start boxing up your belongings, run the numbers. Start by contacting local real estate agents to receive estimates of your home's value. Compare the estimates so you can develop an idea of how much you might be able to get for your home. Research online to see what homes in your neighborhood have

sold for recently — this can also help you determine your home's potential selling price.

Take similar steps when you look for your new home. One option that might be available is to rent a new house or apartment for a length of time before buying it. That way, you'll learn whether the home and the location suit you, helping you avoid buyer's remorse.

If you're buying a new home, don't forget to account for the down payment, home inspection, closing costs, and other associated charges. Factoring all of the numbers into the equation may reveal whether downsizing makes the most sense for you and your financial situation.

4. Consider downsizing your belongings, not just your home

For some people, downsizing might simply mean cutting down on clutter rather than relocating. It's easier said than done, particularly if you've amassed many belongings over time. When purging your home, consider the following:

- **Take your time.** Don't feel pressured to clear out your entire home in one fell swoop. Instead, make a plan to do one room or section of your home at a time.
- **Involve your children.** If you have kids, consider asking them for their help. Many hands make light work, and your children may end up expressing interest in items they would like to have.
- **Sell valuables.** Maybe you can't find a new home for that antique necklace you never wear or the rare baseball cards collecting dust in your attic. Consider having those items appraised and selling them to an auction house or online. Depending on how many items you're selling and their worth, you could wind up with quite a bit of money that you can use to help cushion your retirement fund.
- **Donate gently used items.** Find out if there are any local organizations in your community that could benefit from furniture, clothing, or any other possessions in good condition that you want to get rid of. Some donation outlets may even offer free pickup of certain items, saving you time and hassle.
- **Clear out junk.** Chances are you've accumulated items that you simply won't be able to give away or sell. Discard belongings that serve no purpose other than taking up space in your home. You might be surprised by how much room you could free up.



College Saving: How Does a 529 Plan Compare to a Roth IRA?



529 plan assets surpass \$300 billion mark

As of September 2017, assets in 529 plans totaled \$306 billion.

Source: Strategic Insight, 529 College Savings & ABLE, 3Q 2017 529 Data Highlights

Note

Investors should carefully consider the investment objectives, risks, charges, and expenses associated with 529 plans before investing. Specific information is available in each plan's official statement. Keep in mind that there is the risk that 529 plan investments may not perform well enough to cover costs as anticipated. Also consider whether your state offers any 529 plan state tax benefits and whether they are contingent on joining your own state's 529 plan. Other state benefits may include financial aid, scholarship funds, and protection from creditors.

529 plans were created 22 years ago, in 1996, to give people a tax-advantaged way to save for college. Roth IRAs were created a year later, in 1997, to give people a tax-advantaged way to save for retirement. But a funny thing happened along the way — some parents adapted the Roth IRA as a college savings tool.

Tax benefits and use of funds

Roth IRAs and 529 plans have a similar tax modus operandi. Both are funded with after-tax dollars, contributions accumulate tax deferred, and qualified distributions are tax-free. But in order for a 529 plan distribution to be tax-free, the funds *must* be used for college or K-12 education expenses. By contrast, a qualified Roth distribution can be used for anything — retirement, college, travel, home remodeling, and so on.

In order for a distribution from a Roth IRA to be tax-free (i.e., a qualified distribution), a five-year holding period must be met *and* one of the following must be satisfied: The distribution must be made (1) after age 59½, (2) due to a qualifying disability, (3) to pay certain first-time homebuyer expenses, or (4) by your beneficiary after your death.

For purposes of this discussion, it's the first condition that matters: whether you will be 59½ or older when your child is in college. If the answer is yes (and you've met the five-year holding requirement), then your distribution will be qualified and you can use your Roth dollars to pay for college with no tax implications or penalties. If your child ends up getting a grant or scholarship, or if overall college costs are less than you expected, you can put those Roth dollars toward something else.

But what if you'll be younger than 59½ when your child is in college? Can you still use Roth dollars? You can, but your distribution will not be qualified. This means that the earnings portion of your distribution (but not the contributions portion) will be subject to income tax. (Note: Just because the earnings portion is subject to income tax, however, doesn't mean you'll necessarily have to pay it. Nonqualified distributions from a Roth IRA draw out contributions first and then earnings, so you could theoretically withdraw up to the amount of your contributions and not owe income tax.)

Also, if you use Roth dollars to pay for college, the 10% early withdrawal penalty that normally applies to distributions before age 59½ is waived. So the bottom line is, if you'll be younger than 59½ when your child is in college and you use Roth dollars to pay college expenses, you might owe income tax (on the earnings portion of the distribution), but you

won't owe a penalty.

If 529 plan funds are used for any other purpose besides the beneficiary's qualified education expenses, the earnings portion of the distribution is subject to income tax *and* a 10% federal tax penalty.

Financial aid treatment

At college time, retirement assets aren't counted by the federal or college financial aid formulas. So Roth IRA balances will not affect financial aid in any way. (Note: Though the aid formulas don't ask for retirement plan *balances*, they typically do ask how much you *contributed* to your retirement accounts in the past year, and colleges may expect you to apply some of those funds to college.)

By contrast, 529 plans do count as an asset under both federal and college aid formulas. (Note: Only parent-owned 529 accounts count as an asset. Grandparent-owned 529 accounts do not, but withdrawals from these accounts are counted as student income.)

Investment choices

With a Roth IRA, your investment choices are virtually unlimited — you can hold mutual funds, individual stocks and bonds, exchange-traded funds, and REITs, to name a few.

With a 529 plan, you are limited to the investment options offered by the plan, which are typically a range of static and age-based mutual fund portfolios that vary in their level of risk. If you're unhappy with the market performance of the options you've chosen, under federal law you can change the investment options for your *existing* contributions only twice per calendar year (though you can generally change the investment options on your *future* contributions at any time).

Eligibility and contribution amounts

Unfortunately, not everyone is eligible to contribute to a Roth IRA. For example, your income must be below a certain threshold to make the maximum annual contribution of \$5,500 (or \$6,500 for individuals age 50 and older).

By contrast, anyone can contribute to a 529 plan; there are no restrictions based on income. Another significant advantage is that lifetime contribution limits are high, typically \$300,000 and up. And 529 plan rules allow for large lump-sum, tax-free gifts if certain conditions are met — \$75,000 for single filers and \$150,000 for married joint filers in 2018, which is equal to five years' worth of the \$15,000 annual gift tax exclusion.



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Commonwealth does not provide legal or tax advice. Please consult with a legal or tax professional regarding your individual situation.



How does working affect Social Security retirement benefits?

If you're thinking about working as long as possible to increase your retirement savings, you may be

wondering whether you can receive Social Security retirement benefits while you're still employed. The answer is yes. But depending on your age, earnings from work may affect the amount of your Social Security benefit.

If you're younger than full retirement age and make more than the annual earnings limit (\$17,040 in 2018), part of your benefits will be withheld, reducing the amount you receive from Social Security. If you're under full retirement age for the entire year, \$1 is deducted from your benefit for every \$2 you earn above the annual limit.

In the year you reach full retirement age, \$1 is deducted from your benefit for every \$3 you earn above a different limit (\$45,360 in 2018).

Starting with the month you reach full retirement age, your benefit won't be reduced, no matter how much you earn.

Earnings that count toward these limits are wages from a job or net earnings from

self-employment. Pensions, annuities, investment income, interest, and veterans or other government benefits do not count. Employee contributions to a pension or a retirement plan do count if the amount is included in your gross wages.

The Social Security Administration (SSA) may begin to withhold the required amount, up to your whole monthly benefit, as soon as it determines you are on track to surpass the annual limit. However, even if your benefits are reduced, you'll receive a higher monthly benefit at full retirement age, because the SSA will recalculate your benefit and give you credit for any earnings withheld earlier. So the effect that working has on your benefits is only temporary, and your earnings may actually increase your benefit later.

These are just the basics, and other rules may apply. The Retirement Earnings Test Calculator, available at the Social Security website, ssa.gov, can help you estimate how earnings before full retirement age might affect your benefit.



Will a government pension reduce my Social Security benefits?

If you earned a government pension from a job not subject to Social Security tax withholding ("noncovered

employment") and are also eligible for Social Security benefits through a job where Social Security taxes were withheld, two provisions might reduce your benefits: the windfall elimination provision (WEP) and the government pension offset (GPO).

The WEP affects how a worker's Social Security benefit is calculated. If you're subject to the WEP, your benefit is calculated using a modified formula, possibly resulting in a benefit reduction. The amount of the reduction depends on the year you turn 62 and the number of years in which you had substantial earnings and paid into Social Security (no reduction applies to those with 30 years or more of substantial earnings). The reduction cannot be more than one-half of your pension from noncovered employment. Spousal and dependent benefits may also be reduced, but not survivor benefits.

The GPO may affect spousal or survivor benefits if the spouse or survivor earned a

government pension from noncovered employment. In this case, the GPO may reduce Social Security benefits by up to two-thirds of the amount of the pension.

For example, if you receive a \$900 monthly government pension and are eligible for a \$1,000 monthly Social Security spousal benefit, you would receive only \$400 per month from Social Security [\$1,000 minus \$600 (2/3 times \$900) equals \$400]. You would still receive your \$900 pension, so your combined benefit would be \$1,300.

Not all government employees are subject to these provisions. For example, federal employees under the Federal Employees Retirement System are exempt because they pay Social Security taxes on earnings. However, public-sector employees in some states do not pay Social Security taxes, and thus could be subject to the WEP. The GPO affects pensions from noncovered federal, state, or local government employment.

Rules and calculations for the WEP and the GPO are complex. Visit the Social Security website, ssa.gov, for more information.

