

Farewell to Director Karen Hawkins of the Office of Professional Responsibility

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On May 11, 2015, after serving as Director of the Office of Professional Responsibility ("OPR") for approximately six (6) years, Ms. Karen Hawkins announced her intention to step-down and retire, effective July 11, 2015.

The OPR is responsible for interpreting and applying the Treasury Regulations governing practice before the Internal Revenue Service (commonly known as "Circular 230"). It has exclusive responsibility for overseeing practitioner conduct and implementing discipline. For this purpose, practitioners include attorneys, certified public accountants, enrolled agents, enrolled actuaries, appraisers, and all other persons representing taxpayers before the Internal Revenue Service.

The vision of the OPR is "to be the standard-bearer for integrity in tax service." As stated on OPR's website, its "vision, mission, strategic goals and objectives support effective tax administration by ensuring all tax practitioners, tax preparers, and other third parties in the tax system adhere to professional standards and follow the law." Its specific goals include: increasing tax advisor awareness and understanding of Circular 230; applying the principals of due process in all investigations and proceedings; and building, training and motivating its administrative team.

Ms. Hawkins will undoubtedly be missed by her work government colleagues. She will also be missed by the tax community. During her tenure at the OPR, she not only cleared the decks of a large backlog of pending disciplinary cases, she increased tax practitioner awareness and understanding of Circular 230. Ms. Hawkins consistently made herself available to the tax community, speaking at numerous tax institutes and forums (including the Oregon Tax Institute). In a direct, clear and concise manner, she reminded practitioners of their obligations under Circular 230. Ms. Hawkins did not shy away from tough questions raised by tax practitioner audiences. Instead, she hit the questions head on and provided complete and earnest answers. Ms. Hawkins was likely responsible, in whole or in part, for the amendments to Circular 230 that alleviated the need for tax advisors to insert the silly disclaimers on all written communications that may contain federal tax advice.

While I have to assume Ms. Hawkins was a tough adversary in any disciplinary proceeding, especially given her no-nonsense approach to matters, she gave good and well-needed guidance to the tax community following amendments to Circular 230. The tax community should be thankful for all of Ms. Hawkins' hard work and her strong dedication to the tax profession. She will be greatly missed.

As of the writing of this blog post, the Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service had not named a successor Director. I assume that Lee Martin, the Deputy Director, will serve as acting Director until a successor is named.

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