

FOLLOW-UP

# Brushing up on your taxes — with help

TERESA DIXON MURRAY  
Plain Dealer Reporter

With less than a month until the tax filing deadline, readers certainly are being challenged by their returns this year.

The Plain Dealer's annual tax call-in this week was the busiest in recent memory, with nearly 900 people calling for help on everything from the income filing guidelines to completing entire Schedule Ds.

Thirty-seven area CPAs and tax experts volunteered their time to answer callers' questions during the three-hour call-ins Sunday and Monday. Here are some of the most frequently asked and most interesting questions:

#### Filing issues

**Q:** *Do I have to file?*

**A:** There are income limits that vary by age and filing status. To hit a few of the main ones, you must file a return if your gross income was at least these amounts: Single under 65: \$7,800; single 65 or older: \$8,950; married and both spouses 65 or older: \$17,500; married with one spouse under 65: \$16,550. This does not include Social Security benefits, unless you are married filing a separate return.

**Q:** *My tax refund will amount to only \$7 or \$8, but it will cost me \$40 to file my return. Do I still have to file?*

**A:** Yes, if your income warrants, said CPA Randy Ruggaard of Ruggaard & Associates Inc. in Twinsburg. Your requirement to file has nothing to do with whether you owe or get a refund, or how much it is.

**Q:** *I don't have to file a federal return because I don't make enough, but the Regional Income Tax Agency sent me a local return. Do I have to file it?*

**A:** If your only income is from things like Social Security and dividends, then you don't, said CPA Cynthia Hatfield of Zinner & Co. in Pepper Pike. Just send RITA or the Central Collection Agency a letter if you were mailed a return. But if you had income from wages, rental property or a business, you must file the local return.

**Q:** *I can't afford to pay my taxes. What do I do?*

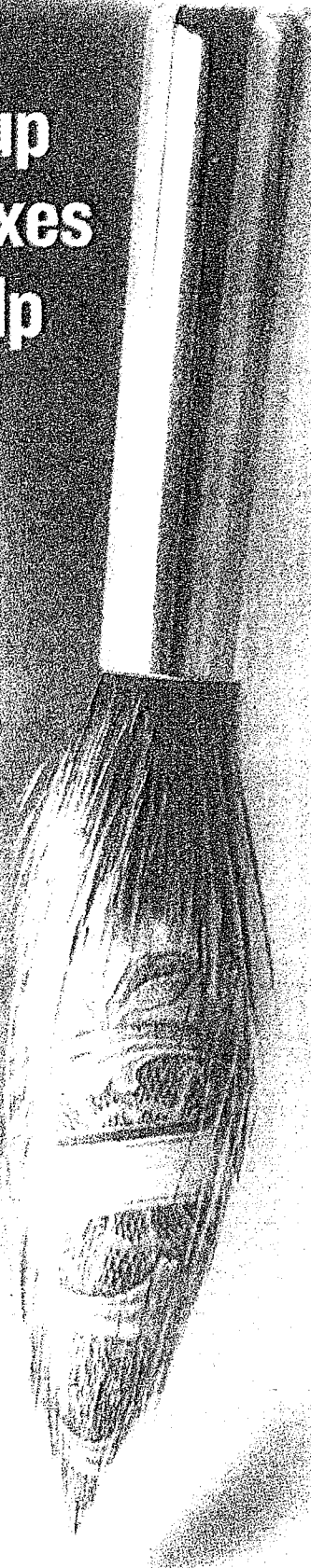
**A:** First, file your return. The penalties are worse if you don't file.

As for the taxes you owe, you can try for an application for extended time to pay, said CPA Sharon Nieland of Wasacz & Skvoretz in Middleburg Heights. It might be a long shot, but that would eliminate the penalties for paying late.

You'd still owe interest on the late payments.

The other option is to pay on an installment plan, Nieland said. Your penalties for paying late would be cut in half; you'd still have to pay full interest.

**Q:** *Can we file married on the federal return and separate in Ohio, since it works out better?*



# THE PLAIN DEALER