

For Immediate Release

The California Tax Education Council Urges Vigilance as Ghost Tax Preparer Scams Persist

CTEC warns to watch out for promises of big refunds and unsigned tax returns.

Sacramento, CA (January 26, 2026) – Each year, a new wave of so-called “ghost tax preparers” emerge, offering low fees and the lure of big refunds, only to vanish as soon as the tax deadline passes.

“Ghost tax preparers never sign the returns they prepare for clients. That’s intentional—it allows them to avoid accountability and makes it nearly impossible for authorities to track them down,” said Fernando Angelo, chair of the [California Tax Education Council \(CTEC\)](#), which oversees the registration of almost 40,000 tax preparers statewide. “It’s not just unethical, not signing a client’s tax return is also illegal.”

Ghost tax preparers use a range of tricks to avoid detection. Some print out the return and instruct clients to sign and mail it themselves, omitting their own name from the paperwork. Others file electronically, once again bypassing the requirement to include their own information, and mark the return as “self-prepared.”

“They’re constantly on the move and attracting clients through word-of-mouth,” said Lester Crawford, a CTEC board member. “Their tactics are intentional and target vulnerable taxpayers.”

Other red flags to watch for include:

- Placing a business label on your copy of the return, but filing a blank copy with the IRS and California Franchise Tax Board (FTB).
- Claiming they’ll sign your return later, only after they’ve received payment.
- Insisting on cash payments and refusing to provide a receipt.
- Fabricating income or false deductions to inflate your refund.
- Diverting your refund into their own bank account instead of yours.

Anyone preparing tax returns for a fee must be an [attorney](#) with the State Bar of California, [certified public accountant \(CPA\)](#) or accounting firm verified by the California Board of Accountancy, [CTEC-registered tax preparer \(CRTP\)](#), or [enrolled agent \(EA\)](#). If you suspect you’ve encountered a questionable tax preparer, you can file an anonymous report at [CTEC.org](#). For more tips on how to stay safe this tax season, tune into the [Taxpayer Beware podcast](#)—also available in Spanish at [contribuyentecuidese.org](#).

Established by the California State Legislature in 1997, CTEC is dedicated to protecting taxpayers from fraudulent and incompetent tax preparers.

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