

701—38.15 (422) Relief of innocent spouse for substantial understatement of tax attributable to other spouse. A husband and wife are generally jointly and severally liable for the total tax, penalty, and interest from a joint return or from a return where they file separately on the combined return form. However, effective for tax years beginning on or after January 1, 1994, a married person who meets the criteria for an innocent spouse established in Section 6015 of the Internal Revenue Code may be relieved of liability for a substantial understatement of tax that is attributable to grossly erroneous items of the other spouse. For purposes of determining if an individual is an innocent spouse for state income tax purposes, the provisions in Section 6015 of the Internal Revenue Code will be followed as well as federal court cases, letter rulings, and revenue rulings which deal with innocent spouse. In addition, for tax years beginning on or after January 1, 2002, the provisions of Sections 6015(c) and 6015(f) of the Internal Revenue Code regarding relief for separation of liabilities and equitable relief, respectively, are applicable for Iowa income tax purposes. The following are the criteria that must be considered for purposes of determining if an individual is an innocent spouse for Iowa income tax purposes:

1. Understatement of tax attributable to grossly erroneous items of the other spouse. An understatement of the tax is the excess of the tax required to be shown over the tax actually shown on the return. The understatement must be entirely attributable to grossly erroneous items of one spouse in order for the other spouse to be eligible for status as an innocent spouse. As an innocent spouse, the individual will not be liable for the substantial understatement of tax of the other spouse. The tax liability attributable to the understatement is computed by adding penalties and interest that accrued by the date of the deficiency notice. Grossly erroneous items may include any omission from gross income such as income from embezzled funds. Grossly erroneous items may also include deductions or Iowa tax credits that are without factual or legal foundation.

2. Filing status for return with an innocent spouse. For state income tax purposes, a married taxpayer filing a return with a spouse can qualify as an innocent spouse only if the taxpayers file a joint return or file separately on the combined return form. A married taxpayer who files a separate state return will not be eligible for innocent spouse status.

3. Innocent spouse must establish lack of knowledge of other spouse's substantial understatement. Innocent spouse relief applies only if the individual claiming to be an innocent spouse can establish that in signing the state return, the individual did not know and had no reason to know that there was a substantial understatement of tax. The innocent spouse's lack of knowledge must exist until the time the return is filed and not just until the end of the year (or period) covered by the return. The U.S. Tax Court has provided that the standard for determining if a taxpayer had reason to know of an omission is whether a reasonable person under the particular circumstances at the time of signing the return could be expected to know of the omission.

In many cases in which innocent spouse relief is sought, the following factors play a role: business background or education of person claiming innocent spouse relief, involvement in family financial affairs by the person claiming innocent spouse relief, involvement in the family business or the transaction giving rise to the understatement by the person claiming innocent spouse relief, whether or not there were lavish or unusual expenditures in the family or increase in standard of living of the family and knowledge of embezzlement activities of the other spouse.

4. Whether or not it would be equitable to hold the innocent spouse for the substantial understatement. Innocent spouse relief applies only if, taking into account all facts and circumstances, it would be inequitable to hold the claimed innocent spouse liable for the deficiency in tax for the taxable year attributable to the substantial understatement. Factors taken into account in determining whether it is inequitable to hold a spouse liable for a tax deficiency include whether the spouse seeking relief has been deserted, divorced, separated, or widowed.

Another important factor in determining equitable treatment for the person claiming innocent spouse relief is whether the person received a benefit attributable to the substantial understatement of taxes. The fact that the spouse received a benefit in the nature of "ordinary support" does not support a finding of significant benefit to deny the spouse relief. In addition, ordinary family support may include maintaining an affluent lifestyle if the standard of living is not enhanced by the tax understatement.

Where the taxpayer participated in the financial affairs of the other spouse and enjoyed the benefits from the activities of the other spouse, innocent spouse relief will not be granted.

5. Time period for requesting innocent spouse relief. For tax periods beginning on or after January 1, 2004, innocent spouse relief must be requested within two years after the date the department initiates collection action on an income tax deficiency or assessment against the person claiming innocent spouse relief.

This rule is intended to implement Iowa Code section 422.21 as amended by 2002 Iowa Acts, House File 2116.