

## **About 1,300 STAR checks unclaimed, possibly tossed out as junk mail, state says.**

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ALBANY, N.Y. -- New York tax department officials say about 1,300 STAR checks -- or 1 percent of the total mailed out in 2016 -- have not been cashed.

Last year was the first year the state switched from up-front exemptions on tax bills to mailing out checks to more than 130,000 homeowners.

The checks -- which are for about \$750 for most households -- could have been mistaken for junk mail, thrown in the trash or just lost. The checks for those aged 65 or older - who get a bigger tax break - average about \$1,500.

Those who missed their checks in the mail during last year's mailing were sent a follow-up letter in July. If there was still no response -- or if the information provided was not complete -- the New York Department of Taxation and Finance plans in March 2018 to forward information on the uncashed checks to the state Comptroller Office's unclaimed funds division.

The state comptroller's office maintains a database where you can check to see if the state is holding any unclaimed money for you.

If homeowners think they might be among the 1,300 or so who missed their checks in the mail, they can call (518) 457-2036 for more information.

"Our reps should be able to answer any questions they may have," spokesman James Gazzale said.

The state last year began cutting the checks to more than 130,000 homeowners who bought their homes after August 2015. The STAR credit program is aimed at easing homeowners' school tax bills, which come due in September in most of New York.

Only homeowners who bought their homes after August 2015 are getting the school tax relief -- or STAR -- credit checks. Taxpayers who bought their homes before that date get an up-front exemption on their school tax bills and don't have to worry about getting the check in their mailbox.

STAR checks are also only mailed to homeowners who make less than \$500,000 a year between themselves and their spouses.

Gazzale said that it is often the case that there's a mixup within a household, and calling the department can clear up any confusion. Sometimes a property owner calls about a missing check only to learn it was already cashed, he said, or other times they received the tax exemption and weren't owed a check at all.

"We hear of cases like that all the time," Gazzale said. "It might have been a case that they were ineligible and weren't sure whether they got their check."

For nearly two decades, all homeowners got the exemption on their tax bills up-front instead of waiting for a check. But the law changed last year, and thousands of checks arrived long after school tax bills were due.

As a result, taxpayers swamped state legislators and their local assessors with calls about where their checks were. And a flurry of legislative changes were introduced during this year's legislative session in Albany, including some that aimed to return the program to the way it was.

This year, the state says the program has gone more smoothly. And if the state is late in delivering checks this year, it will have to give taxpayers their checks in addition to 3 to 4 percent interest. Taxpayers are eligible for interest if the checks don't come within 30 days after the school tax bills are filed.