

PLANNING FOR YOUR FUTURE

It can happen to you

By Bernard A. Krooks, Certified Elder Law Attorney

We hear about it on the news all the time; yet, we think it can't happen to us. Well, guess what, it can. Identity theft is a growing problem; especially among seniors and those with cognitive impairments. The consequences of being an identity theft victim can be devastating, sometimes ruining a lifetime history of good credit. However, there are things each of us can do to minimize the possibility of identity theft or effectively deal with it if it happens. Some of these tips come from the National Consumer Law Center

Checks: You probably shouldn't put your telephone number on your checks. If you want to put a telephone number on your checks, use your work telephone number instead of your home telephone number. Don't put your home address on your checks. If you have a post office box, use that instead. Or, better yet, don't put any address on your checks. Never have your Social Security number printed on your checks. If your Social Security number is printed on your checks, anyone can have access to it. You should be very careful about whom you give your Social Security number to since that number can be used by undesirables to access much of your private information.



Wallet: Photocopy the contents of your wallet. Copy both sides of each document in your wallet, including your driver's license, other identification cards, and credit and debit cards. This will permit you to know what you had in your wallet, including account numbers, so you know what account holders need to be notified in case your wallet is lost or stolen. Keep the photocopy in a safe place. Some credit and debit card companies offer a registry as part of their services. It may be worth the fee to call one number, and then have the registry notify all of your credit and debit card issuers about a loss or a theft.

Other tips to avoid identity theft:

- Sign your credit cards immediately
- Do not carry your Social Security card with you; keep it in a safe place.
- Do not attach a personal identification number (PIN) or Social Security number (SSN) to any card that you carry with you, or on any receipt or paper that you are going to throw away.
- Shred any document that contains a PIN, SSN, or account number before you throw it away. Garbage cans are feeding grounds for others who wish to gain access to your personal information.
- Check your receipts to make sure you have received your own and not someone else's.
- Alert your credit or debit card issuer if you do not receive your statement; someone may be stealing your mail.
- Do not give your personal information to anyone until you have confirmed the identity of the person and verified that you need to provide the information.
- Check your credit reports on a regular basis. There are services you can sign up for which will notify you of any changes in your reports.
- Put passwords on your accounts, but do not use something easily available, such as your mother's maiden name or your date of birth.

If your wallet or credit and debit cards are lost or stolen, or if you suspect identity theft, then you should notify the credit or debit card issuers immediately. This is easier to accomplish if you have kept a list of your card numbers and the toll free telephone numbers of the credit card and debit issuers. Keep this list in a place where you can find it, or subscribe to a registry. You should also immediately file a police report where your wallet or credit or debit cards were lost or stolen.

You should also notify the three major credit reporting agencies to place a fraud or identity theft alert on your accounts. This is important because thieves may apply over the Internet for credit in your name. In fact, you might not even know you have become a victim of identity theft until several months after it happens. By setting up this alert, you will be able to tell any company that is checking your credit in order to issue new credit in your name that your information was stolen. They will have to contact you by telephone to authorize new credit. The names and phone numbers for the three major credit reporting agencies are: Equifax - 800-525-6285; Experian - 888-397-3742; Trans Union- 800-680-7289.

You can order copies of your credit reports from each of these agencies, and review the credit reports to see if any new accounts in your name have been opened fraudulently. You can receive a free copy of your credit report once every 12 months

from each of the three major credit reporting agencies. To get your free credit reports, go to www.annualcreditreport.com or call 877-322-8228. Of course, in order to get your free credit report, you will have to provide some personal information so that they know you are the person who is really asking for the report. None of the consumer reporting agencies will attempt to contact you in an attempt to secure personal information. Do not respond to any emails or phone calls from anyone claiming to be a representative of any of the consumer reporting agencies as this is likely a scam.

Identity theft is one of the fastest growing crimes. You can help protect yourself against identity theft by following these tips.

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