



## Mistaken Identity

### Are You Vulnerable to Identity Theft?

By Eileen Cohen, CPA, Partner

Spring has arrived and you finally resolve to do something about all the clutter. You toss out the pre-approved credit card applications, ancient bank statements, bills and charge receipts. You finally give away that old computer. You're feeling back in control, but you may have just allowed that control to be stolen. You've made yourself vulnerable to identity theft.

Last year, according to the Federal Trade Commission, there were over 45,000 complaints of identity theft in California alone. Identity theft victims may spend thousands of dollars and months or even years trying to clear their names and their credit after thieves have trashed them. The most important thing is to be vigilant about *all* your personal information.

#### Prevention Tips:

1.) **Never give out your personal information – by phone or email – if you're not absolutely certain of the identity of the person requesting it and why he**

**or she needs it.** Thieves may pose as someone calling or emailing from your bank or credit card company in order to get your information. Identity thieves may even pose as the IRS requesting information.

2.) **Safeguard your documents and mail.** Shred all documents that contain any personal information. Pick up new checks at the bank rather than having them mailed to your home. Keep your eye on cashiers while they have your credit card; be sure they're not making a second copy, or "skimming" the information.

3.) **Be smart about passwords and PINs.** Don't write them down, memorize them. Don't use common identifiers as passwords or PINs, such as



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your birth date, mother's maiden name, or the last four digits of your Social Security number or phone number. The most secure passwords contain a mix of letters and numbers.

4.) **Keep track of when bills and statements should arrive.** If a bank statement or credit card bill is late, contact the company right away. A thief may have submitted a change-of-address form on the account.

5.) **Monitor your credit report.** The three credit agencies (Equifax, Experian and TransUnion) are required to give you one free report each year. To order a report, visit [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com) or call toll-free (877) 322-8228.

## Mistaken Identity CONTINUED

### What to Do If You Are a Victim:

If you discover or suspect that you're a victim of identity theft, act quickly – time is of the essence. Take the following steps in order to clear up your credit and your name:

- **Place a fraud alert on your credit report, and review your credit reports for additional errors.** A fraud alert will help prevent a thief from opening more accounts in your name. Contact the fraud hotlines for one of the three agencies; they are required to then contact the other two. (See **HOT TIPS**)

- **Close any accounts to which you think a thief may have access.** Call the companies' fraud departments right away, and send any documentation you have by certified mail. Use the ID Theft Affidavit, available online at the Federal Trade Commission site: [www.consumer.gov/idtheft](http://www.consumer.gov/idtheft)

- **File a report with the local or state police, and the Identify Theft Registry.** California's Identity Theft Registry is a centralized database to verify that your identity has been stolen. Find more information about the registry at <http://ag.ca.gov/idtheft>

- **Take steps to correct the false information on your credit report.** See complete guidelines for action in *Take Charge – Fighting Back Against Identity Theft* at [www.consumer.gov/idtheft](http://www.consumer.gov/idtheft)

- **File a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission.** Your report will assist the FTC in their efforts to stop identity theft. You can file online or call the FTC's Identity Theft Hotline, toll-free: 1-877-ID-THEFT (438-4338).

- **Contact NSBN.** We need to be aware of the situation and can advise you on steps to take.

While identity theft is a growing threat for everyone, following the steps outlined above will reduce your vulnerability. The key is to be conscious always of the value of your personal information, and the importance of safeguarding it.

*Eileen Cohen may be reached at [efc@nsbn.com](mailto:efc@nsbn.com) or (310) 288-2272.*

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