



Consumer Issues

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Identify Theft

It sounds like a nightmare—you wake up one morning and another person has taken your identity. They may be using your credit card to make purchases, your Social Security number to get government benefits or your credit history to take out a car loan in your name. How could this have happened? Could it have been prevented?

Learn the steps you can take to guard against identity theft with a new publication from the Federal Trade Commission. *ID Theft: When Bad Things Happen To Your Good Name* looks at how identity thieves get your personal information, how they use it, what you can do to protect yourself and what to do if you are a victim. Find out how to “opt-out” of prescreened credit card offers and marketing lists. Learn which questions to ask when someone requests your Social Security number and how to check information on file about you at the three major credit bureaus. If you are a victim, use the helpful chart to keep track of the actions you’ve taken to report identity theft.

To protect yourself against identity theft, manage your personal information carefully. Before you give out any information, ask how it will be used.

Put passwords on your credit, bank, and phone accounts so that only you have access to them. It’s also wise to limit the amount of personal information you carry. Leave extra credit cards and your Social Security card at home in a safe place.

If you are a victim of identity theft, there are three basic actions you can take. First, contact each of the three major credit bureaus and have a “fraud alert” placed on your file. Next, contact your creditors for any accounts that have been tampered with or opened fraudulently. Finally, file a report with the local police and refer to *ID Theft: When Bad Things Happen to Your Good Name* to find state and federal offices that deal with ID theft. This publication costs 50 cents. To get your copy:

Call toll-free 1-888-8 PUEBLO. That’s 1-888-878-3256, weekdays, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. EDT and ask for Item 372G. This publication costs 50 cents. Have your credit card handy.

Send your name, address, and a check or money order for 50 cents to Consumer Information Center, Dept. 372G, Pueblo, Colorado 81009.

Visit www.pueblo.gsa.gov to read or print this and hundreds of other FCIC publications for free.

Opt Out Request Line

Tired of all the credit card offers you receive in the mail? You have the right to stop credit reporting agencies from including your name and address on prescreened lists of unsolicited credit and insurance offers. Call 1-888-5-OPT-OUT (1-888-567-8688) to request that your name be withheld. Opting out of prescreened offers could also help prevent identity theft.

Fewer Consumers Are Seeking Protection from Creditors

More than 1 million federal bankruptcy petitions have been filed each year since 1996. In 1998, a record high of 1.44 million petitions were filed. A recent report from the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts indicates that fewer Americans filed for bankruptcy in 1999. The most common type of protection sought by debtors that year was the right to keep some belongings and sell other property to repay creditors. These decreases in bankruptcy petition rates may be the result of a prosperous economy.

Source: Bankruptcies fall. (2000, March 4). *The Patriot-News*, p. A9.

I Bonds: A Safe Way to Invest Your Savings



What: A type of investment offered by the U.S.

Treasury beginning September 1998. The "I" in I Bond stands for "inflation indexed" because part of its total return is adjusted for inflation.

Why: Protects savings from inflation for up to 30 years by guaranteeing a return over and above the rate of inflation for up to 30 years

Who: U.S. citizens and residents of any age with a Social Security number can buy I Bonds.

How: Bonds can be ordered at most banks and credit unions, or through employer-sponsored payroll savings plans. Fill out a purchase order, pay for the bond, and receive it in the mail within three (3) weeks. They can also be purchased online (see address below).

Where: For more information about I Bonds: <http://www.savingsbonds.gov/>

Bureau of the Public Debt
Savings Bond Operations Office
Parkersburg, WV 26106-1328
1-800-4US-BOND or 1-800-487-2663 (current rate information)

Facts and Features

- Bonds are sold at face value in denominations of \$50, \$75, \$100, \$200, \$500, \$1,000, \$5,000, \$10,000, and grow with inflation—protected earnings for up to 30 years.
- The I Bond is presently earning 7.49 percent. This is a combination of two rates—a fixed rate and an inflation adjustment. The fixed rate is the real amount you earn over and above inflation. It is currently 3.60 percent for all I Bonds sold between May 1 and Oct. 31, 2000.
- Bonds will not decrease in value.
- You can invest as little as \$50 or as much as \$30,000 per year.
- Earnings are added to the bond every month, with interest compounded semiannually.
- Bonds earn interest for up to 30 years.
- Bonds can be cashed in anytime six months after the issue date to get the original investment plus earnings. (Note: cashing a bond within the first 5 years forfeits 3-months' earnings.)
- Lost, stolen, or destroyed bonds can be replaced free of charge.
- Federal taxes on earnings can be deferred for up to 30 years.

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- Bonds are exempt from state and local taxes.
- Bonds are U.S. Treasury securities backed by the full faith and credit of the United States Government.
- They make great gifts for all occasions.

Source: *I Bonds Investor's Guide*. (2000). Department of the Treasury, Bureau of the Public Debt.

Your One-Stop Shop for Federal Information: the Federal Information Center (FIC)

The Federal Information Center (FIC), established in 1966, describes itself as “a single point of contact for people who have questions about Federal agencies, programs, and services.” Every year FIC information specialists assist 3 million callers through its nationwide, toll-free numbers: 1-800-688-9889 or 1-800-326-2996 for TTY users. FIC handles public inquiries from 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., Eastern Time, Monday through Friday, except federal holidays.

- Federal information is also available at their Web site: <http://fic.info.gov/>
- Information about PA State government can be found at <http://www.state.pa.us/>

Know Your Liability Limit for ATM Cards, Credit and Debit Cards, Stored-Value Cards, and Checks

Federal laws have been enacted to protect victims of credit card and banking fraud from consumer liability. Liability limits range from \$0 to more than \$500 depending on the type of account and how soon the problem is reported.

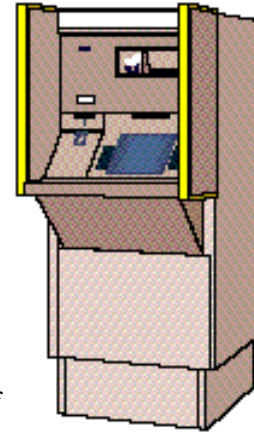


Here is some information you should know about your potential liability:

Automated Teller Machine (ATM) Cards

If a thief withdraws money from a cash machine using a consumer's ATM card:

- Maximum liability = \$50 if card is reported lost or stolen within 2 business days of discovering the loss (not within 2 days of the transaction)
- Maximum liability = \$500 if card is reported within 60 days
- Maximum liability = all money obtained by thief plus other charges (e.g., bounced check fees) if card is reported after 60 days



Credit Cards

Federal law mandates a maximum liability of \$50 per card for unauthorized charges. If the problem is reported before unauthorized charges are made, maximum liability = \$0.

Debit Cards

Until recently, consumer liability for a lost or stolen debit card was equal to that of the ATM card. VISA and MasterCard recently changed their policy so that the maximum liability is the same as that for credit cards = \$50.

Stored-Value Cards

A stored-value card is “electronic cash,” loaded with a set dollar value for small-dollar purchases. Therefore, maximum liability is equal to the amount of money on the card.

Checks

State laws determine if the consumer is responsible for a lost or stolen check used in a forgery. Consumers are usually not liable for losses when forgery is involved.

Source: FDIC Consumer News (Spring 2000). *Paper or Plastic?*

22 PA Banks Offer the ETA

The Electronic Transfer Account (ETASM) is a low-cost account that gives federal payment recipients, particularly those without a financial account, an opportunity to receive their payments through electronic funds transfer or direct deposit. Eligibility extends to all federal payment recipients who receive Social Security, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), veteran's benefits, federal employee salary or retirement, military salary or retirement, and Railroad Retirement payments.

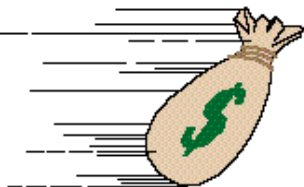
Electronic Transfer Accounts:

1st National Community Bank
Citizens and Northern Bank
Cross Valley Federal Credit Union
East Penn Bank
First Columbia Bank and Trust
First Federal Bank
First National Bank of Berwick
First National Bank of Herminie
First National Bank of West Chester
First National Community Bank
Grange National Bank
Harleyville Savings Bank
Irwin Bank & Trust Company
Merchants National Bank
Muncy Bank and Trust Company
New Horizons Community Federal Credit Union
Northumberland National Bank
Penn Security Bank and Trust
Slovenian Savings & Loan of Franklin-Conemaugh
Wayne Bank
WBGH Employees Federal Credit Union

New banks may be added daily. To determine if a bank in your area will offer ETA in the future, go to:
<http://www.eta-find.gov/index.html>

Go Direct Deposit

Did you know that 94 percent of Social Security beneficiaries in Collier County, Florida, receive their benefits by direct deposit? Direct deposit is a smart choice. It's safe, simple, and convenient. Your benefit goes directly into your bank account every month. You don't have to worry about our check being lost or stolen. Your money is available immediately. No wonder direct deposit is a hit in Collier County. You can sign up at your bank, savings and loan, or credit union, or call Social Security at 1-800-772-1213. Millions of people in other counties across the country receive their Social Security and Supplemental Security Income benefits by direct deposit. In fact, 78 percent of Social Security beneficiaries nationwide use direct deposit. Shouldn't you sign up?



<http://www.ssa.gov/deposit>

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<http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/cimenu.html>

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