*Material provided by www.balancepro.org

THE BASICS OF IDENTITY THEFT

Your wallet is missing. Thousands of dollars have been charged to your credit cards, your checking account is empty, and loans you never took out appear on your credit report. What happened? You've been a victim of identity theft – an increasingly common and inventive crime.

Identity theft occurs when someone uses your personal information to commit fraud or other crimes. It may involve your computer, portable electronic devices, mail, money transfers, financial records or medical/ insurance information.

Fortunately, there are preventative measures you can take to substantially reduce the chance of identity theft occurring, as well as steps to recover from any damage if you are a victim.

BALANCE

Common Practices

How your information is obtained

Thieves use a variety of illegal techniques to obtain identity information. They may:

- Take mail from a mailbox, or divert mail to another location by filling out a change of address form
- Access credit reports by posing as landlords or employers
- Hack into personal computers or intercept information sent wirelessly
- Go through trash to find identification and financial documents
- Pose as legitimate companies or government agencies to request personal information via email (called phishing) or text message (called smishing)
- Steal hard copy or electronic files from your workplace or another organization storing your information
- Capture your information from the magnetic stripe on the back of your ATM, debt or credit card
- Use social media to mine your data
- Take advantage of a personal relationship

How your information may be used

Once identity thieves have your personal information, they may use it to:

- Charge on existing credit accounts or open new credit accounts in your name
- Use existing or open new checking accounts in your name and write bad checks
- Establish phone or wireless service in your name
- Use your debit cards or counterfeit checks to drain your checking account
- Take out loans to buy cars and other big ticket items
- Obtain services via your insurance policy

Preventing Identity Theft

There are many ways to protect your private information from fraud. Some tasks take a bit of effort, but cleaning up the mess identity thieves leave behind is far more difficult and time-consuming.

Credit reports

Monitoring your account information diligently is one of the best ways to keep your personal information under control. At least annually, check your credit report from each of the three major credit bureaus for fraudulent activity. Through the Annual Credit Report Request Service, you are entitled to one free report per year from each of the three credit bureaus. You may be entitled to additional free reports if you've been a victim of identity theft. If you find inaccuracies on your report, dispute them immediately and contact the involved creditors or other parties.

Personal identity information

Keep all identification and financial documents in a safe and private place.

- Provide personal information only when you know how it will be used, you are certain it won't be shared, and you've initiated contact and know who you're dealing with.
- Make all passwords hard to guess by using a complex combination of numbers and upper and lower case letters.
- Request a vacation hold if you can't pick up your mail and deposit outgoing mail in post office collection boxes or at your local post office.
- Be aware of your workplace's security procedures and keep your purse or wallet in a safe place.
- Do not carry your Social Security card or have it or your driver license number printed on your checks. Share this information only when necessary and with those you trust.

Credit card, ATM, debit cards & checking accounts

- Photocopy both sides of your credit cards so you have all the account numbers, expiration dates and phone numbers, and keep the copies in a safe place. Carry only those cards you really need and cancel unused accounts.
- Shred all statements and pre-approved credit card offers with a crosscut shredder.
- Be aware of people behind you at the ATM, or anywhere else you swipe your card. If you give your credit or debit card to someone for a transaction, watch them swipe it and inspect the receipt for accuracy.
- Know your billing cycles and contact your creditors if your statements don't arrive on time.
- Know where your checkbook is at all times. When you write a check, be sure to print firmly and use indelible ink. Check your account statement for fraudulent activity.
- Examine your transactions online or on your statements regularly.

Computer

- Update your virus protection software periodically, and after every new virus alert is announced. Also, use a firewall program to prevent your computer from being accessible to hackers.
- Do not download files or open hyperlinks sent from people you don't know.
- Use a secure browser to guard your online transactions. Enter personal and financial information only when there is a "lock" icon on the browser's status bar and look for the URL to read "https" instead of the unsecured "http" designation.
- If you must store personal and financial information on your laptop, use a strong password – one that is a hard-to-guess combination of upper and lower case letters and numbers, don't use an automatic log-in feature, and always log off when you're finished.

Recovery Guide

If you are a victim of identity theft, understand that minimizing damage will take patience and a systematic approach. However, the sooner and more aggressively you deal with the problem, the faster you will see results.

To start, commit yourself to becoming and remaining organized. Since you will be communicating with a lot of people and have many tasks to complete, use the Action Log to keep track. Keep copies of all letters, file paperwork promptly, and store everything in a safe and accessible place.

Creditors and Financial Institutions

- If accounts have been used or opened illegally, contact your creditors immediately. For any compromised account, get a new account number and card. You may need to provide the creditor with a police report. Monitor all future account statements carefully for evidence of new fraud.
- If a collection agency attempts to collect on a fraudulent account, explain (in writing) that you are a victim of identity theft and not responsible for the debt. Ask that they confirm in writing that you do not owe the balance and that the account has been closed.
- For checking account fraud, contact your financial institution to place stop payments on any outstanding checks that you did not write. Close current checking and savings accounts and obtain new account numbers and passwords.

Legal and Government Agencies

- Report the crime and file a police report. Request a copy of the report and keep the phone number of your investigator handy. For additional documentation, you may also report the crime to your state's Attorney General office.
- Notify the US Postal Inspection Service if your mail was stolen or your address was used fraudulently.

Credit Reporting Bureaus

- Check your credit reports from all three bureaus, Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion. Dispute any fraudulent items by submitting a form online or mailing a letter to the credit bureaus.
- Even if the fraudulent information hasn't yet appeared on your reports, be proactive and report the crime to credit bureaus now. It is a good idea to have a fraud alert placed on your credit reports. When someone applies for credit under your name, the creditor is alerted to verify that the person applying is you. The initial fraud alert only lasts 90 days. However, if you file a police report, you can extend the alert to seven years. To add an extra level of security, place a freeze on your credit files with the respective bureaus. You will be given a password that will be needed by anyone wishing to access your credit file.

Action Log

Since you will be communicating with a lot of people and have many tasks to complete, use our Identity Theft Action Log to keep track of your efforts. Keep copies of all letters you send and receive, file paperwork promptly, and store everything in a safe and accessible place.

To download the Identity Theft Action Log (PDF) visit www.balancepro.org/idtheft and select "Download Action Log" from the left-side menu. Copies may also be obtained by calling BALANCE at 888.456.2227.

Helpful Resources

- **Equifax**
  To order a credit report call:
  800.685.1111
  To report fraud call: 800.525.6285
  www.equifax.com
- **Experian**
  888.397.3742
  www.experian.com
- **TransUnion**
  To order a credit report call:
  800.888.4213
  To report fraud call: 800.680.7289
  www.transunion.com
- **Annual Credit Report Request Service**
  877.322.8228
  www.annualcreditreport.com
- **National Association of Attorneys General**
  www.naag.org
- **Consumer Financial Protection Bureau**
  855.411.2372
  www.consumerfinance.gov
- **U.S. Postal Inspection Service**
  877.876.2455
  www.postalinspectors.uspis.gov