

## **How to protect yourself: Freeze and Unfreeze Your Credit**

### **This is a free service provided at each of the three Credit Bureaus.**

**Disclaimer: This is a courtesy provided here. To make changes like, place a freeze or to unlock your freeze, you will need your Pin, Password, User Name, and any other identifiers ... you should write them down!**

#### **1. Freeze your credit.**

"The most important thing you can do is put a freeze on your credit," says Chappie Henderson (a source for this article). This is the strongest way to protect the sensitive data in your credit reports and, as of recent history, the process is completely free. Freezing your credit effectively blocks anyone from applying for new credit in your name, and it stays in place until you lift it. This preemptive step can save you the substantial hassle and cost involved with dealing with an identity theft.

To freeze your credit, you need to contact each of the three major credit bureaus individually, either online or by phone – This does not affect you using your credit cards.

**Equifax (800-685- 1111)**

**Experian (888-397-3742)**

**Trans Union (888-909-8872)**

Once a freeze is in place, your credit is protected until you lift the freeze. This won't affect your credit score, but you'll need to lift the freeze temporarily if you want to apply for new credit. AND while you are lifting it, instruct the website to refreeze it at a specific date. (I have done this).

#### **2. Stop giving out your SSN.**

There's no reason you should carry your social security card in your wallet. No travel agent needs your social security number. No travel loyalty card or rewards program requires that number. Do not give your social security number to a car rental agency.

"You should be very cautious about who you provide your social security number to," says Chappie. "You're just creating less exposure for yourself. You're limiting the number of places where your social security number is stored and could potentially be compromised."

"If somebody asks you for your social security number, your response should be to ask why," says Henderson, who balks when he comes across an online form asking for his social security number. "Usually there's an 800 number that I call and I ask why they need it. You'd be surprised how many organizations will say, 'Just put nine zeroes.' It turns out; a lot of them really don't really need that information."

That goes for paper forms, too. "It's routine to walk into a doctor's office and they're asking for your social security number on a form, but for years I've just always left those blank, and nobody really ever argues with it," says Chappie Henderson (the source of this article).

We're in this mess because financial institutions have systematically misused social security numbers, which were first introduced in the 1930s. "Social security numbers were not designed to be secret. Furthermore, they were not intended as a form of authentication. They are merely identifiers," says Henderson. "But how many times have you seen it, where the last four digits of your social security number is a form of verification?"

Chappie has repeatedly called for a radical fix. He suggests that Congress should direct the Social Security Administration to publish all active SSNs, thus rendering them useless as authenticators.

Until that happens, save yourself a huge potential headache. Take matters into your own hands and freeze your credit. **\*\*To temporarily unfreeze for a loan, use your 'saved by you' information.**