



District Attorney's Office • 18th Judicial District

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Consumer Advisory

Identity Theft Safety for Consumers

Thieves have several methods of stealing identities today, making the task of safeguarding personal information all the more challenging. The wide-scale rise in data breaches and malware have given identity thieves more opportunities to steal from victims, many of whom are unaware their identity has been stolen until they apply for credit and are turned down. As a hedge against identity theft or further victimization, credit reporting bureaus offer the following levels of protection:

Initial Fraud Alert: Placing a fraud alert on a credit report provides further protection for ID theft victims, as well as for consumers who are at an increased risk of ID theft, such as having lost or misplaced a wallet. A fraud alert notifies businesses to contact consumers if an inquiry has been made on their credit, or if a line of credit has been requested in a consumer's name. It still allows consumers to apply for a loan or line of credit, because lenders or creditors are able to access the consumer's credit report. Alerts are also easy to implement - consumers need only place a fraud alert with one credit reporting agency, who in turn will notify the other two credit reporting bureaus. It's easy to do and is free; and once in place, good for 90 days. The downside is the short duration of protection, although a fraud alert can be extended after the 90 day period under certain circumstances.

Extended Fraud Alert: An *extended fraud alert* offers the same credit protections for up to a period of seven years, also at no cost. However, it is only available to actual victims of identity theft. To meet criteria, victims must submit proof of the crime, such as a police or ID theft report to one of the three credit bureaus. All three credit bureaus will be notified by the agency who receives the report.

Active Duty Alert: Special provisions exist for deployed military personnel who can place a fraud alert on their credit for up to one year at no cost, by contacting one of the three credit bureaus.

Credit Freeze: Blocking, or "freezing" credit offers the best deterrent against ID theft and is available to anyone. A credit freeze is particularly helpful in instances where account information has been stolen, such as in a data breach, where potential victims have no way of knowing when, or if, their information will be used by ID thieves. As with the other alerts, a credit freeze will **not** stop thieves from using a victim's credit card, bank account number, or other financial information currently in their possession, but it will prevent them from opening new credit accounts in the consumer's name. However, a credit freeze also "locks out" creditors – an inconvenience if credit approval is needed before a consumer can receive a loan, or line of credit; or to allow a potential employer access if applying for a job. In Colorado, the initial freeze is free, but costs \$10.00 to have a freeze lifted; and an additional \$10.00 fee to reinstate it. This can be costly if credit approval is sought frequently. Groups who are exempt from the freeze include government agencies, the courts, and other authorities who, for lawful reasons, have a right to access credit reports.

For information on how to apply for an alert or credit freeze, contact the following credit reporting bureaus: Equifax: 1-888-766-0008 www.equifax.com, Experian – 1-888-397-3742 www.experian.com, Trans Union: 1-800-680-7289 www.transunion.com