

Protecting Yourself from Identity Theft

As of September 21st, all fees to place and remove credit freezes at the major credit bureaus have been eliminated. CoPIRG recommends all Colorado consumers take advantage of this opportunity and place a credit freeze at the three major credit bureaus (Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion) as well as the National Consumer Telecommunications & Utilities Exchange (NCTUE).

A credit freeze blocks a credit card company, a cell phone company, or a lender from viewing your credit report, which shows your credit history. These companies do not traditionally issue new credit to a customer if they cannot see that customer's credit report or the credit score derived from it. Therefore, by blocking creditors from accessing your credit report, you're stopping identity thieves who apply for new accounts in your name, especially if they have your personal information.

Because creditors run credit checks with any one or a combination of the three big credit bureaus (Equifax, Experian and TransUnion), you need to block access to your reports with all three. There have also been reports of fraudulent accounts being opened for cell phones using credit reports provided by the National Consumer Telecommunications & Utilities Exchange (NCTUE). We therefore also recommend freezing your credit report at NCTUE.

Credit freezes do not affect your ability to use existing credit you already have, such as a credit card or loan. Nor do freezes affect your credit score. In fact, freezes help protect your score by preventing your credit from being negatively scored if someone racks up debt in your name.

You can easily remove a freeze or "thaw" your credit report when you want to apply for new credit. Freezes can be temporarily or permanently removed when you want.

Note – companies can still buy your credit information from credit bureaus to market to you eve if you freeze your credit. "Pre-approved" credit card offers in the mail are an example. To stop these unsolicited marketing call toll-free 1-888-5-OPT-OUT (1-888-567-8688) or visit www.optoutprescreen.com.

How to freeze (and unfreeze) your credit report

Placing a freeze with one bureau does not automatically freeze your account with the other bureaus. You have to place a freeze with each bureau where you want one. Some creditors use one, some use another, so your best coverage is to freeze all three.

You will receive a PIN number for your credit freeze with each bureau. You will use this PIN number when you want to unfreeze your credit report any time you want to apply for new credit.

If you want to temporarily lift a freeze because you are applying for credit or a job, try to find out which credit bureau the business uses to check credit reports. You can save some time by only lifting your freeze for that credit bureau.

You can temporarily lift a freeze for a particular creditor or for a specific period of time, from one day to one year.

Make sure to account for the time it can take to thaw your report. In most cases if you request a thaw online or over the phone, your report can be unfrozen within 15 minutes. However, it can take longer if you don't have your PIN number that was assigned to you when you froze your report, so make sure to keep your PIN number in a safe, memorable place where you can quickly retrieve it when needed.

Equifax:

Online: <https://www.equifax.com/personal/credit-report-services/>

Phone: 1-800-349-9960 (automated), 1-888-298-0045 (live operator)

Mail: Equifax Security Freeze, P.O. Box 105788, Atlanta, Georgia 30348

Experian:

Online: <https://www.experian.com/freeze/center.html>

Phone: 1-888-397-3742

Mail: Experian Security Freeze, P.O. Box 9554, Allen, Texas 75013

Experian includes a potentially confusing three paragraph "Security Freeze Warning." They are just explaining that you will need to unfreeze your credit report before applying for credit if you ever wish to do so in the future.

TransUnion:

Online: <https://www.transunion.com/credit-freeze/place-credit-freeze>

Phone: 888-909-8872

Mail: TransUnion LLC, P.O. Box 2000, Chester, PA 19016

National Consumer Telecommunications & Utilities Exchange:

Online: https://www.exchangeservicecenter.com/Freeze/jsp/SFF_PersonalIDInfo.jsp

Phone: 1-866-349-5355

Mail: NCTUE Security Freeze P.O. Box 105561 Atlanta, GA 30348

***NOTE on Credit Locks** - The credit bureaus offer a similar but different product called a credit lock. Credit freezes are a right mandated by law and not conditional on terms set by companies the way credit locks are. For example, if you sign up for free credit locks*

with Equifax and TransUnion, they can use your information for marketing purposes and share it with other financial companies that want to sell you something. Additionally, TransUnion makes you agree to an arbitration clause.

Additional Identity Theft Prevention Resources:

Report fraud and access free resources provided by Colorado Attorney General's office – their one-stop website offers guides to protecting yourself against all kinds of identity theft and sign up for fraud alerts. <https://www.stopfraudcolorado.gov/fraud-center/identity-theft.html>

Request a free credit report to identify existing account fraud - all three credit bureaus will give you one free report by law per year. The official website authorized by the government for requesting these free reports is www.annualcreditreport.com

Place a free renewable 1-year fraud alert. Any consumer can place a free renewable 1-year fraud alert by law by contacting any one of the three credit bureaus. You'll need to set a tickler on your calendar to renew it every three months.

Tax Refund Fraud: File your taxes as soon as possible, before thieves do. Also, [if you qualify](#), get an Identity Protection (IP) PIN.

Social Security Benefits Fraud: Sign up for your [“my Social Security” \(MySSA\) account](#) before thieves claim it and change your direct deposit info to their own checking accounts.

Health Care Services / Medical Benefits Fraud: Sign up for online accounts with your health care and insurance providers to periodically check for any fraudulent services on your statements.

Other Fraudulent Activity: Check your free annual consumer reports with companies that [specialize in collecting information](#) often misused by criminals.

Phishing Scams: Ignore unsolicited requests for personal information by email, links, phone calls, pop-up windows, or text messages.

Additional detailed Identity Theft Tips from the U.S. Federal Trade Commission are here if you think you have had your identity stolen:
<https://www.identitytheft.gov>

Please contact us for more information at danny@copirg.org or 303-573-7474 ex 303