Consumer Watch

A Monthly Newsletter from the Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection

William M. Rubenstein, Commissioner *Dannel P. Malloy, Governor*

www.ct.gov/dcp Vol. 3, No. 6 January 2014

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Suggested Links

www.ct.gov/dcp
Our website offers the latest and most comprehensive information that we have on dozens of consumer-related topics!

www.SmartConsumer.ct.gov
Basic information for consumers of all ages to protect themselves and avoid scams!

https:www.elicense.ct.gov
To verify a license, permit or registration, or to run a roster of licensees. Also, the place for online renewal!

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Five Steps for Keeping Your Resolution to Spend Smarter in 2014

Depending on the survey you read, about half of Americans make New Year's resolutions, and about half of those who do, also experience some success in keeping their resolution. According to a study released in December by the University of Scranton, "saving more / spending less" is the third most popular resolution for 2014, after "losing weight" and "getting organized."

If you're looking to avoid unnecessary spending and spend smarter 2014, we propose you adopt our five steps described below.

Step 1: Protect your data. This applies to all types of information about you – from your social security number to your checking account number to the passcode on your email account. Letting any information get into the wrong person's hands could be setting yourself up for problems down the road. Data breaches like the recent Target situation have left financial accounts vulnerable; similar breaches at insurance companies, banks, and universities lead one to wonder whether criminal masterminds will devise ways to systematically sort through vast volumes of data to match records and control lucrative accounts.

Your computer, your tablet and your smartphone all store information about you, where you bank, where you shop, and how you pay your bills. They may be used to identify where you live and work, who provides your medical care and where your children attend school. The exposure risk with mobile devices may be greater than with home computers, since we have come to use them frequently, including "on the run," when we don't stop to think about the inherent risks.

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From Commissioner Rubenstein

A brand new year always brings fresh opportunities for improvement and change. As we begin 2014, amid long-awaited news that our economy is starting to show true signs of recovery, as spending slowly increases and everyone starts to feel a bit less shaky about their financial future, let's not forget the lessons learned over the past few years. Taking responsibility for our financial decisions, watching our spending, remaining careful with important information and data, and being informed consumers are important responsibilities that each individual must shoulder. At the Department of Consumer Protection we stand ready to inform, educate, monitor and regulate the marketplace, and when needed, to defend the rights of all Connecticut consumers. Best wishes in 2014!

Bill Rubenstein

Commissioner William M. Rubenstein

Are Identity Theft Protection Services Worth their Cost?

By now, most people have heard the tough-sell ads for "LifeLock," an identity theft protection service that pledges to keep you safe from thieves who are poised to snatch your identity at a moment's notice. Companies such as Debix, LoudSiren and TrustedID offer similar identify theft protection services.

For their efforts, such companies charge anywhere from $110 to $300 or more per year. The companies promote monitoring services, free fraud alerts, stopping junk mail and credit offers, and securing copies of your credit reports for you. But with minimal effort, you can already do these things to protect yourself -- at no cost.

Your first step is to make a habit of monitoring your monthly bank and credit card statements for suspicious activity that can signal identity theft. If you spot something, take action immediately.

Free fraud alerts – Placing an initial fraud alert on your credit reports at the big three credit bureaus, Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion prevents creditors from accessing your credit file if someone tries to open a new account in your name. Without access to your credit report, creditors are likely to deny a new credit application. If you believe that someone has stolen your identity, call any one of the three credit reporting companies. Ask them to place an initial fraud alert on your credit report.

- Equifax – Phone: 1-800-525-6285
- Experian – Phone: 1-888 397 3742
- Transunion – Phone: 1-800-680-7289

To get a fraud alert on all three credit reports, you need to only notify one company and they will notify the others. This alert is temporary, expiring after 90 days. LifeLock, Debix and similar companies automatically renew these alerts over and over again for their customers, effectively making them permanent. Having a long-term block on your credit report gives peace of mind, since no one can make use of your good name and credit history to open up fraudulent accounts. If you mark your calendar to call the credit bureau every 90 days to renew your free fraud alert, this peace of mind can also be yours.

When would you want a fraud alert?

- If you already know that your social security number has been part of a data breach, or if your card is lost or stolen.
- If you find out that your credit card, debit card or wallet is stolen.
- If your home has been burglarized (unknown to you, documents may have been taken).
- If your computer, cell phone, or other device has been lost or stolen,
- If you receive notification that your personal data has been breached (such as the recent Target breach)
- If you find unauthorized transactions on any credit, banking or investment accounts.

In order to get the fraud alert for free, you generally must provide a police report, so make sure you file one with local police as soon as you notice the loss, theft, or irregularity in your statements. A fraud alert that you pay for will run anywhere from $3 to $20 dollars.

Opt -out of pre-approved credit offers – The less exposure you have to tempting credit offers, the less likely you are to be drawn to them. ID theft services will request that your name be removed from pre-approved credit card offers and junk mail lists, and they will renew those requests as they expire. You can do this for free at optoutprescreen.com.

Access to your free credit reports. Checking your credit report at each company once a year is a good way to be sure that nothing shady is going on with your identity. Paid services like LifeLock will order credit reports for you each year, but you can do this yourself for free at www.annualcreditreport.com.

The bottom line is that LifeLock and similar services are legitimate services, and not a totally bad deal if you're concerned about identity theft, are looking for convenience and don't mind spending money on things that you can do for free.

True or False?

If I miss the annual unwanted drug collection day in my town, I have two other ways to safely dispose of my old medicine instead of waiting till next year. ***True or False?*** ***Answer, page 4***

5 Steps for 2014, continued from page 1

- *Watch your apps*. Unsophisticated apps can compromise your privacy and security – either through bad privacy practices or careless code. Only download apps from reputable sites (iTunes, Android Market, Amazon, etc.), and only after checking each apps' rating and reading user reviews to make sure it is widely used and respected.

- *Set strong passwords on your phone, laptop and tablet*. They are the first line of defense against someone getting access to all the personal information on your devices.

- *Set different, but equally strong passwords for all your online accounts*. Write them down (without identifying what they are) and keep them in a safe place – not in your wallet or purse, which could get lost or stolen! There are password storage and management programs now available – but doesn't common sense suggest keeping such valuable and vulnerable information completely beyond the reach of any technology?

- *Steer clear of suspicious links.* Smaller screen size makes it hard to tell if a site looks legit, so people are more likely to find themselves on bogus sites when using their tablet or smart-phone. Avoid suspicious-looking links in email, SMS or on social networking sites, and never enter personal information on a website you're not absolutely sure of.

- *Beware Wi-Fi hotspots.* Checking your email on public Wi-Fi at the local coffee shop? Just remember that these "hotspots" transmit your data over-the-air, so you run the risk of someone seeing information that you pull up or enter on the keyboard. For that reason, don't check your bank balance, buy online, or provide personal information over a public Wi-Fi network.

- *Block spyware and other viruses*. Malware can be inserted without your knowledge onto your mobile device to track your activity, while keystroke loggers can record passcodes as you type them in. There are several free, reputable apps that can prevent you from inadvertently downloading malware. As noted in the November issue of *Consumer Watch*, Lookout is a mobile security app for both Android and iPhone, and is available in a free, ad-supported version. Webroot SecureWeb is another reputable app available free for both Android phones and iPhones (through iTunes). Reviews of similar products can be found online – look for reviews by independent tech journals.

- *Keep your devices current.* Finally, whenever there are updates to the operating systems for your mobile devices, download them.

Step 2: Use appropriately registered and licensed contractors – If you plan to have work done around the house, from wallpapering to well drilling, you need the assurance and peace of mind that can only come from using a reputable, well-recommended contractor who is backed up with a current, Connecticut home improvement registration (or license, if the job requires it) from the Department of Consumer Protection.

Examples of work requiring licensed professionals include electrical, plumbing, heating and cooling, lawn irrigation, in-ground swimming pools and spa maintenance and installation, solar energy, landscape architecture, and land surveying.

Step 3: Check references, complaints, and records – you want to know as much as you can about a business or individual **before** you hand over your money and your trust – not after. We always suggest that you get plenty of professional references and call at least three.

Calling *more than three* is even better.

Contact the Department of Consumer Protection and ask if we have complaints about a company or individual before you hire them. You can verify their license or registration with us at http://ct.gov/dcp/verify. Also check with the Better Business Bureau at http://ct.bbb.org/. Have you run a search in Google? Does their name come up in a news story about problems at the company? Finally, have they been sued by any former customers? You can look up small claims court cases at http://www.jud2.ct.gov/Small_Claims/.

Step 4: Sleep on it – If someone calls or comes to your door to sell you gutters, or offers to replace some shingles, clean your chimney or repave your driveway, tell them you need to think it over. Even if they say they're from the government and that you only need to give them some I.D. so they can send you a new health care card or a money order, ask them to put it in writing so you can review the information. If someone tells you their offer is only good for today, a smart consumer will shrug and tell them no, but thanks, anyway.

Step 5: When you give, make it count. Hiring "professional solicitors" to raise funds and then letting those solicitors keep most of the money is a practice that's legal and pretty widely utilized by nonprofit organizations for a number of reasons.

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Five Steps, *cont. from page 3*

Paid solicitation campaigns can be a temporary solution for new nonprofits, and likewise can be helpful to small organizations with neither the staff nor expertise needed to conduct a fundraising campaign. However, many well-meaning organizations regularly utilize paid services – at great cost to the causes themselves. While experts suggest that in the spirit of responsible fundraising, at least 65 percent of the amount collected should reach the intended target and the remainder be used for the solicitors and expenses, in many cases, this ratio is reversed. Paid solicitors get the lion's share of donations. In Connecticut, of more than $198 million collected for charity by paid solicitors in 2012, the charities themselves netted just over $84 million. About 58 percent of the donations went to the paid solicitors and campaign expenses; 42 percent to the causes.

To gauge whether your contributions will be fairly divided between the campaign and the charity itself, visit CharityNavigator.org for a complete report on the charity's track record, including whether there have been warnings or complaints about its activities. If you are solicited by a fundraiser, our website, http://ct.gov/dcp/verify will indicate if the charity is actively registered with us to solicit funds in Connecticut as the law requires. The charity's record should also include the percentage of gross revenue from its fundraising campaign that is guaranteed to the charity.

Best bet - give directly to the charity of choice – not through paid solicitors –your donation is sure to go further. Best wishes for a healthy, productive and profitable 2014!

True or False?

The answer is True. Local collections are a convenient way to dispose of unwanted medication. But you can put unwanted meds out with the weekly trash, as long as you do it in a way that makes it unappealing to any scavenging animal or person. Place unwanted medication in empty margarine tub, dissolve with warm water, add coffee grounds, mustard, ketchup, etc. to make a gloppy concoction. Seal with duct tape. Put outside in your regular trash bin.

Also, many local police departments now have an onsite, locked drop-box for unwanted medications. No questions asked; it is available anytime the police department lobby is open. These towns currently participate: Ansonia, Brookfield, Canton, City Of Groton, Colchester Resident Troopers Office, Darien, Guilford, East Hartford, East Lyme, Enfield, Farmington, Greenwich, Manchester, Naugatuck, New Canaan, New Haven, Newington, New London, Norwich, Plainville, Putnam, Redding, Ridgefield, Shelton, Simsbury, Southington, South Windsor, Town Of Groton, Vernon, Waterbury, Waterford, Watertown, Wilton, Windsor Locks, and Wolcott.

You Need to Know About: Connecticut's Lemon Law for Assistive Technology

Created by Connecticut General Statutes 42-330-335, this law can provide relief to anyone who has an assistive technology device that doesn't work the way it's supposed to.

Assistive technology devices are any items that enable or enhance the ability of a person with a disability to see, hear, communicate, or achieve mobility. Such devices can include but aren't limited to:

- Manual and power wheelchairs
- Seating and positioning aids
- Alternative and augmentative communication devices
- Talking software
- Wheelchair lifts

The only devices not covered under the Lemon Law are hearing aids and their batteries.

Any consumer who buys or leases an assistive technology device from a dealer or manufacturer, or who assumes ownership of an assistive technology device before its warranty period ends. State law requires that warranty periods for assistive technology devices be at least two years from date of purchase, even if the manufacturer's warranty states that it is less.

When a problem substantially impairs the use, value or safety of the device and the manufacturer or vendor has made three attempts at repair

OR

The device is out of service for 30 days, consecutive or non-consecutive. If either of these sets of conditions is met, then the device is considered a lemon. Depending upon preference and circumstances, the consumer may request:

- A pro-rated refund of the cost, including interest and finance charge *
- Replacement with an alternative of comparable quality
- Early termination of the lease

**A formula determines the exact refund amount, with deductions for time the device was used.*

Contact the State Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities to learn more about the Lemon Law or to apply.

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Office of Protection & Advocacy
for Persons with Disabilities
60-B Weston Street
Hartford, CT 06120-1551

(860) 297- 4300 (Voice)
(860) 297- 4380 (TTY)
1-800-842-7303 (V/TTY) CT Only
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