

## **NEWSLETTER #4**

Hope that you were all able to make it through the recent Hersheys Mill Ice Age and are ready for the spring newsletter (#4 if your're counting.)

This edition we'll be tackling a pet security peeve of mine that affects many of us who live here – the use of our social security number as our Medicare ID and why, if you're not on Medicare yet, you should never give any medical provider your social security number.

### **QUICK TIPS**

Back in December just after I issued the last newsletter I received a scam letter to reduce my mortgage payment from the **LOAN DEPOT**. Although it was full of copied reference to Fannie Mae and Freddy Mac it was still an obvious fraud. If you're wondering why I'm including it in the April newsletter be aware that these folks usually don't stop with one attempt. Springtime may be the next round.

If you are in an auto accident you can help protect yourself by only providing the minimum information required by state law. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania is a poster child for identity theft by requiring you to divulge your name, address, phone number, license plate number, drivers license number, and all insurance information. We should ask our state representatives to reduce this to our name, insurance company and policy number which is already on our insurance cards which we are required to carry when driving.

### **MEDICAL PROVIDERS AND SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBERS**

For many years I have avoided providing my social security number to doctors and other medical personnel since I learned that a deceased doctor's office sold his paper records for \$.25 per pound which was perfectly legal. Not providing my social security number has never been an issue.

Unfortunately, the US government decided to use social security numbers for medicare IDs even though no one was supposed to use social security numbers as IDs.

So, if like me , you are on medicare you can't avoid providing your social security number but you can reduce the risk. To do this, make a copy of your medicare card and use a magic marker to cover the first five numbers. Then when the provider's clerical staff asks to make a copy of your medicare card, give them that one. I have never had a problem doing this and you will significantly reduce the number of chances to have your ID stolen.

### **DUNNED FOR DEBTS YOU DON'T OWE**

This problem comes in two flavors. Irresponsible behaviour by legitimate financial institutions and the other is just plain old scammers.

#### **Irresponsible behaviour by legitimate financial institutions**

I have personal experience with this one. We had a credit card that we cancelled and actually had a refund due. However, in the process of closing the account the bank erroneously thought there was an interim balance due which was sent to collections when the bank owed us a refund. What is interesting about trying to clear this up is that the credit card company is the collection agency's customer, not you. Thus, the collection agency is not interested in **you** trying to prove **you** don't owe the money. You have to fight with the credit card company because only they can call off the dogs. Be warned, this will be a struggle and will require persistence.

## **DEBT YOU DON'T OWE**

This kind of debt is based on debts that are not yours. They can come from being scammed in that someone used your ID, a clerical mistake, or an actual scam by a fraudulent credit collection agency. Regardless of the source, the results are pretty much the same. Relentless phone calls and threats to garnish your social security payments which cannot be done for private debts. Other threats claim you owe the IRS and you will be arrested, or they will publish your debt and anything else they can think of.

Another, even sleazier take on this is to contact recently widowed women to collect fake medical bills or other personal debts of the deceased.

## **WHAT TO DO**

The first rule is: Don't react to the pressure. Many people pay just to stop the repeated calls, offensive language, and threats even though they don't owe the debt.

Instead, ask for the collection agency's name, address, phone number and license number. If they won't provide them, it's a scam. Another tip is to Google the caller ID shown on your phone. That may yield the collection agencies name which you can then Google for complaints.

Another step is to ask for proof of the debt in the form of detailed statements showing the alleged unpaid charges.

For medical debts get statements showing doctors names, services and dates. Then cross check them with your insurance statements to see if these bills have already been paid.

Finally, complain. Write letters disputing the alleged debts and asking the collection agency to stop contacting you. Get help from Uncle Sam. Sample letters are available at **[www.consumerfinance.gov/blog/debtcollection](http://www.consumerfinance.gov/blog/debtcollection)**. Send copies to the **CFPB** (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau), the **FTC** and your **State Attorney General**. Send everything certified mail with return receipt requested.