

CoPIRG Recommendations in Response to the Equifax Data Breach

Equifax, one of the big three credit reporting agencies, announced on September 7th that it had been hacked, potentially compromising the data of 145 million Americans.

The types of information taken from the massive credit bureau, particularly Social Security numbers and dates of birth, are the keys to new account identity theft. This means identity thieves could open fraudulent credit accounts and rack up tons of debt in your name.

This is a big deal. To make matters worse, there's a lot of confusion over what to do now. Here's our recommendations for what you should do:

Request a free credit report - 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

Consider placing a credit freeze (also known as a security freeze) with all three credit bureaus. A security freeze prevents new accounts from being opened by blocking your credit report from being shared with potential new creditors, such as banks or credit card companies. Only the credit freeze stops new account identity theft. In Colorado, you can freeze your credit for free the first time but could be charged a small fee (\$10) to thaw or lift it and to freeze it again.

Note – companies can still buy your credit information from credit bureaus to market to you. “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

It is recommended you freeze your credit report with at least the three main credit bureaus (Experian, Equifax and TransUnion). 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 money and 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 (you may be charged).

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.freeze.equifax.com>

Phone: 1-800-685-1111

Experian

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

Phone: 1-888-397-3742

TransUnion

Online: <http://www.transunion.com/securityfreeze>

Phone: 888-909-8872

Place a free renewable 90-day fraud alert. Any consumer can place a free renewable 90-day 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.

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>

Moving Forward

We believe Equifax's response has been inadequate and because you can't choose your credit bureau, there needs to be better consumer protections in place. In the coming months, we will make the case that credit freezes and thaws should be free of charge; companies need to get your permission before checking your credit; security of consumer personal information needs to be significantly increased; and credit bureaus should provide better, more timely notifications when there is a risk of identity thefts.

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