

DECEMBER 2011

## Are Your Credit Cards and Identity Safe During Holiday Shopping?

The holidays and extensive sales will have masses of shoppers taking to area malls and stores. While some revel in the excitement of waiting in line with others to get that perfect early holiday gift on sale, identity thieves could be amongst those, waiting for a slip-up and an opportunity to steal your identity.

“Technology today goes well beyond pick pocketing or taking an unattended purse,” said Dorothy Barrick, GreenPath Debt Solutions counselor. “Cyber thieves have the Internet, radio frequency ID scanners and camera phones at their disposal in helping them steal credit card numbers. It only takes small amounts of information and a few keystrokes to open up a new account in your name.”

New this season, many new credit cards contain tiny two-way radios called radio frequency identification (RFID) chips. The technology lets you wave your credit card, passport or license in front of a nearby scanner, instead of having to slide the magnetic stripe through it. This makes it easy for thieves to employ a special scanner to electronically pick your pocket without touching you. RFID blocking products, like credit card secure sleeves, could help prevent the electronic stealing.

“The electronic scanner sends a signal which is received by an antenna embedded into the card, which is connected to the card’s RFID chip, thus activating it. It’s yet another way that ID thieves can steal sensitive data without you even knowing it,” said Barrick.

GreenPath reminds people about protecting their identity, whenever they are shopping:

1. Before you leave your house, take out the credit cards that you know you will not be using (which can also cut down on temptation to shop beyond your list.)
2. Copy the front and back information on your card, so you have contact information quickly in case your card is stolen. Keep this in a safe place in your home.
3. Consider purchasing a secure sleeve to protect your credit card from RFID scanners.

4. Do not carry your social security card with you. That number is vital in opening new credit accounts.
5. Watch where you leave your card when you shop. “Don’t leave it on the counter with people around,” said Barrick. “A simple click of a camera phone or good memory can quickly capture your data.”
6. Keep your receipts in your purse or wallet, not in the bag. The thief might have a harder time returning the merchandise without a receipt. Also, this will make it easier to track your merchandise spending and help you to stay within your budget.
7. If your merchandise bag is stolen, quickly go back to the store to report your robbery. Perhaps a quick thinking salesperson may be able to identify them.

GreenPath also gives three steps to follow if you become a victim of identity theft this holiday season:

1. Contact the three credit bureaus and tell them that you have been a victim of identity theft.

Equifax fraud division 800-525-6285 <a href="http://www.fraudalerts.equifax.com">www.fraudalerts.equifax.com</a>	Experian fraud division 888-397-3742 <a href="http://www.experian.com/fraud">www.experian.com/fraud</a>
Trans Union fraud division 800-680-7289 <a href="http://www.transunion.com">www.transunion.com</a>	
2. Contact your creditors directly and ask to speak to someone in the security department. Freeze the existing account.
3. Contact local law enforcement and get a police report. This will serve as documentation that a crime has occurred.

“It can take anywhere from 20 hours to 600 hours to clear your name when you have been a victim of identity theft,” said Barrick. “By taking some preventive measures, you can ensure a smooth shopping experience throughout the holiday season.”

## New Government Housing Program Aims to Help Homeowners Who Are Current on Their Mortgage

Recently, the US government announced the new Home Affordable Refinancing Program (HARP 2.0), an update of the original 2009 HARP program, for loans guaranteed by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

"If the current mortgage is either Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac guaranteed, then you can contact the company to which you make your mortgage payments now, to ask about refinancing under HARP guidelines," said Setina Briggs-Kelly, GreenPath housing manager.

On November 15, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac released the guidelines to mortgage lenders for the changes made to HARP. However, Briggs-Kelly warned that it may take some time for lenders to read through the guidelines and actually initiate the changes.

It may be helpful for you to meet with a counselor from a HUD approved counseling agency first, to review your situation and to help you determine if you meet the basic requirements to be able to refinance through HARP.

To speak with a counselor from GreenPath, free of charge, call **877-337-3399**.



## GreenPath Client Stresses Importance of Reaching Out For Help

*(Below is an excerpt from The Oakland (MI) Press. Lois Golden, a GreenPath DMP client, discusses how GreenPath has helped her.)*

Search the Internet for credit counseling in Michigan, and a bewildering array of options comes back: bankruptcy attorneys, nonprofit organizations, faith-based groups — even a site that plugs ways to avoid credit counseling.

Lois Golden of Rochester Hills decided to try credit counseling.

A single homeowner with a daughter in college, she lost her job two years ago. After a decade of fighting with a bank over high-interest credit-card debt, she turned to the state of Michigan's website for help.

Golden found the nonprofit GreenPath Debt Solutions on a list of credit counselors licensed by the state of Michigan.

GreenPath was able to renegotiate Golden's credit-card payments down to a manageable level, something she had been unable to do on her own.

Knowing she's not the only person facing tough financial choices, Golden wanted to let others know that help is available.

"I thought, 'I'm pretty savvy; what are they going to teach me?' I walked away with just a wealth of information. They are absolutely what they say they are."

*(To read the entire article, log-on to [www.greenpath.com](http://www.greenpath.com), click on the newsroom link, then "latest headlines, and open the article "Help is Available for credit-card Debt")*

## Homeowner HARP 2.0 Highlights

- To determine if your mortgage is guaranteed by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac, log onto:
  - [www.fanniemae.com/loanlookup](http://www.fanniemae.com/loanlookup)
  - [www.freddiemac.com](http://www.freddiemac.com)
- Homeowners do NOT need to use third-party companies that advertise themselves as "mortgage experts" or "foreclosure specialists" to apply for a HARP loan. The websites and advertisements have already started! Homeowners can contact their current lender or any other lender who offers HARP refinancing, or better still, a housing counselor from a HUD approved, non-profit housing counseling agency.
- HARP is unique in that it is the only refinance program that enables borrowers who owe more than their home is worth to take advantage of low interest rates and other refinancing benefits.
- HARP was originally created in 2009 to help borrowers whose loans were owned or guaranteed by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, but did not have enough equity to refinance to today's lower interest rates. Under the original version of HARP, borrowers who were current on their payments and owed up to 125 percent of the current value of their homes could refinance their mortgage. The original HARP fell short of expectations.
- Mortgages on condos are eligible. Second homes and investment properties are eligible for HARP, but may be restricted to refinancing through the existing lender.

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