



NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH NEWS

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West Valley Senior Lead Office (818) 374-7630
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HOW TO PREVENT MAIL THEFT AND IDENTITY THEFT

Every day, identity thieves get another 668 million chances to commit identity theft and steal someone's identity. That is the average number of pieces of mail the Post Office delivers every day, and each one presents a potential opportunity for identity theft.

Postal inspectors around the country are swamped with investigations into all kinds of mail theft, from basic crimes like pilfering a few mailboxes, to very organized identity thefts that can include the manufacturing of postal uniforms and even the theft of mail trucks. Mailbox tampering is a common problem and it is growing at an alarming rate.

Of course, there are all types of opportunists out there — everything from scam artists to drug users, looking for anything of value that can translate into fast cash or a quick fix. In many ways these can be the most dangerous ID thefts, because the perpetrators typically don't have a pattern. They just grab any opportunity that they stumble upon. There are also smaller criminal gangs becoming better organized, often studying mail routes and pickup and drop-off schedules to determine the best and safest time to hit many mailboxes at once.

Some are even going to extreme lengths to steal from the more secure "Blue Mailboxes," literally pulling them from their concrete posts by tying a chain to the back of a car and driving off. Impersonation of mail staff may also be on the rise, as criminals assume the identities of mail carriers so they won't arouse too much attention hanging around mailboxes.

Mail theft by neighbors is not unusual either. In fact, extensive media coverage may have attracted many new criminals to identity theft and educated them on how to make some quick money from it. What's even worse is that many of these offenders don't think such actions are really crimes, and they don't see themselves as actual criminals. After all, who knows when mail is being delivered on your street better than those in your neighborhood?

The theft of mail from businesses is also on the rise. Incoming and outgoing mail can contain dozens of checks, new blank checkbooks, financial records from the firm's CPA, credit card and bank statements, employee payroll records and a wealth of other information.

Any business that has a lot of foot traffic is vulnerable to a confident stranger simply walking in and picking up a pile or a bag of mail and walking out. The theft can be by an opportunist, an organized gang selecting specific targets, a contractor or supplier, an employee, friend or family member. The list is endless, and so are the opportunities.

If someone takes your mail you have no idea what kind of information they now have about you. It may be enough information in fact to get a driver's license, open a bank account, incur thousands of dollars in credit card charges, or even commit a crime in your name.

If you have your personal mail delivered to a curbside mailbox, make sure it's a secure locking mailbox that is firmly secured into the ground. You can also consider opening a post office box. When you are going on vacation have the post office hold your mail, or have a trusted neighbor retrieve it for you daily.

Collect your mail daily to minimize the amount of time thieves have to steal it.

Mail your outgoing mail at the post office; do not leave it at your home mailbox for your mail carrier to pick up. That outgoing mail red flag is an alert to thieves. Do not deposit mail in a postal mail box after the last scheduled pickup, as there have been instances where entire mailboxes have been stolen from their concrete post at night for their contents. Wait until the following day (during pickup hours) to drop your mail.

Avoid sending checks and paying bills by mail — try online instead — and minimize the number of financial statements and checkbooks that you have delivered by mail.

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Contact Officer Trulik for information on the next Encino Neighborhood Watch Meeting.

Create a personal or family security plan for identity protection. With all the information, advice and solutions being available, a personal security plan can help prevent identity theft; since it will help you find and fill your vulnerabilities before an identity thief exploits them. Use a cross cut shredder to dispose of all bank and credit card information as well as promotional offers.

Have a stolen identity response plan. If you become a victim of identity theft fraud, a properly prepared response plan will save you time, money, and heartache on recovery. Have all your credit card and bank information, along with telephone numbers of the institutions, readily available (and in a safe and secure place), should you become a victim of identity theft.

Use a credit monitoring service. A good identity and credit monitoring service can provide you peace of mind so you won't have to worry about the next data break-in or news headline about the latest instance of Internet identity theft.

LAKE BALBOA:

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Contact Officer Ham or Officer Paredes for information on the next Lake Balboa Neighborhood Watch Meetings.

Lock down your computer with good security software. Every computer should have its own “Security Six Pack” -- a good firewall, up-to-date virus protection, spyware protection, spam filtering, data encryption, and strong passwords -- to help safeguard you from internet identity theft.

Treat your Social Security Number like Grandma's secret recipe. Committing your social security number to memory is one of the most important measures you can take in preventing identity theft. Your social security number is the gateway to your personal credit information — a goldmine that identity thieves look for. Methodically remove it from every printed form it doesn't need to be on. **Do not keep your social security card in your wallet or your purse.**

Conduct a security audit of your accountant. Believe it or not, your accountant may be your weakest security link in preventing identity theft fraud. That's because at many accountants' offices, social security numbers and tax returns are regularly strewn around without much regard for security. Request and confirm that he or she keeps your files in a locked filing cabinet as well as in a protected computer that is safe from internet identity theft.

RESEDA:

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Next Neighborhood Watch Meeting – April 12 and May 10 at 7:00 p.m.
Ann Kinzle Community Room located in the West Valley Community Police Station

Beware of phishing. Phishing is a form of Internet identity theft whereby bogus emails, pretending to be from your bank or other trusted company, request account passwords or other personal information. If possible, go directly to an institution's website and enter your login and password directly on their site.

Beware of pharming. Pharming, another form of Internet identity theft, uses bogus websites that look like your bank and have similar URLs that you may land on if you mistype the intended Internet address. Look at the address bar, and confirm you are where you want to be.

Beware of phowning. Phowning consists of pre-recorded telephone messages or live operators pretending to be from a bank or credit card company that "warn" you about a bogus theft. If you receive such an inquiry, do not offer any personal information. To prevent identity theft, look up the company's fraud department and contact them directly.

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File away your financial information securely and quickly. Don't leave such things lying around; they are a temptation to any "would-be" thief. Always use a cross card shredder when disposing of bank and credit card information.

Complicate your passwords. "1234" may be easy to remember, but it's just as easy for an identity thief to figure out. To reduce your risk, periodically change your passwords, and use a combination of letters and numbers in the password.

REMEMBER TO BE AWARE

Don't Be a Victim of An Auto – Related Property Crime



Lock It - a reminder to always lock your vehicle

Hide It - if you have to leave your valuables in the vehicle, hide them from plain sight

Keep It - a positive reminder that personal responsibility and prevention can safeguard your valuables from theft.

For more information or to get involved in Neighborhood Watch contact the West Valley Area Community Police Station at (818) 374-7630 or visit www.westvalleypolice.org or www.lapdonline.org.