

Get There

Victims of tax-return fraud could be looking over their shoulders for years



By **Michelle Singletary** Columnist January 30 at 7:39 PM

You probably missed these observances last week, but don't miss the message.

The National Cyber Security Alliance designated Jan. 28 as Data Privacy Day in an effort to make people more aware of the importance of protecting their personal information. And Tax Identity Theft Awareness Week, promoted by the Federal Trade Commission, ran Jan. 25 through Jan. 29.

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Both are good campaigns. And while there are some things we can do to protect our privacy, the reality is that guarding our personal data is like trying to put toothpaste back in the tube — it's a tough task. Just ask Crystal, a Virginia woman whose identity was stolen last year. A fraudulent tax return was then filed in her name.

Crystal, who asked that her last name not be used, worries that she'll be victimized again this year. No matter what Crystal did to protect her data — faithfully checking her credit reports, for example — she couldn't fend off the scoundrels who used her Social Security number to file a 1040EZ return.

For people like Crystal who've been victimized, the IRS has a list of recommended actions. Crystal followed the steps last year after she realized that her data had been compromised. She filed a paper return, attaching IRS Form 14039 — the "Identity Theft Affidavit." She also called the Identity Protection Specialized Unit ([800-908-4490](tel:800-908-4490)) at the IRS to answer questions so she could prove that she was the real taxpayer.

Crystal said she was told by the IRS that before this year's filing season began, she would receive a special "Identity Protection Personal Identification Number" (or IP PIN) in the mail to help protect her future tax

returns.

She's still waiting to get the number.

So she called the identity-protection unit again. The advice she got was simply to file her return early.

"I told them I will file as early as I can and had planned on doing that, but I have to wait until I get W-2s and 1099s, whereas the fraudsters can just make up numbers and file before me," Crystal said. "I am so frustrated. I feel like I've been left out in the cold by the IRS."

A spokesman for the IRS said that taxpayers whose identities were used to file fraudulent returns generally will be eligible for the special PIN after their cases have been resolved. This year, the IRS sent 2.7 million taxpayers IP PINs. As for Crystal, the IRS said an additional small group of taxpayers should receive their notices in the next couple of weeks.

Earlier this month, the IRS announced that it was beefing up measures to help taxpayers. As part of a test program, all taxpayers in the District, Florida and Georgia — regardless of whether they are identity-theft victims — can apply to get the six-digit IP PIN to use with their tax returns. These three locations were chosen because of their higher rates of identity theft, the IRS said.

To opt into the program, you can create an account at [IRS.gov/getanippin](https://www.irs.gov/getanippin). As part of the registration process, you'll have to verify your identity. Please note that once you get an IP PIN, you can't opt out. You will have to use the number to confirm your identity on all federal tax returns you file this year and in subsequent years.

Here are some other resources so you can be proactive when it comes to tax-related identity theft:

- Read IRS Publication 4524, "[Security Awareness for Taxpayers](#)."
- Go to [youtube.com/user/irsvideos](https://www.youtube.com/user/irsvideos) and watch the 13 videos in the agency's "[Identity Theft](#)" playlist.

If you become a victim, here are some resources on [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov) to help you start clearing things up:

- Read this guide: "[IRS Identity Theft Victim Assistance: How It Works](#)."
- You have the option of requesting a copy of the fraudulent return. It will be redacted, but the IRS says

there'll be enough information to determine how your information was used. Search for [“Instructions for Requesting Copy of Fraudulent Returns.”](#)

The FTC recently announced that people can now get a free, personalized plan to help recover from identify theft, including tips, fillable online forms and template letters. Go to identitytheft.gov. There is a customized option if someone else has used your information to file a tax return. The site is also integrated with the FTC's consumer complaint system and will allow identity-theft victims to file a complaint with the agency.

The timing of the site launch should really help people like Crystal. But if you become a victim of identity theft, dig deep for a lot of patience, because clearing your name can be taxing.

Write Singletary at The Washington Post, 1301 K St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071 or singletarym@washpost.com. Comments or questions may be used in a future column, with the writer's name, unless otherwise requested. To read more, go to <http://wapo.st/michelle-singletary>.

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