

MANAGING YOUR MONEY \$

Dealing With Debt Collectors

(NAPSA)—If you're behind in paying your bills, you can expect to hear from a debt collector. This includes collection agencies, lawyers who collect debts on a regular basis, and companies that buy delinquent debts and then try to collect them.

What Are My Rights?

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, enforces the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act, which requires that debt collectors treat you fairly when trying to collect on personal, family and household debts. This includes money you owe on a personal credit card account, an auto loan, a medical bill or your mortgage.

In short:

- A debt collector may contact you in person, by mail, telephone, telegram or fax, but may not contact you at inconvenient times or places—for example, before 8 a.m. or after 9 p.m.—unless you agree. A debt collector may not contact you at work if the collector is aware that your employer prohibits it.

- Debt collectors must send you a written "validation notice" telling you how much money you owe within five days after they first contact you. This notice must also include the name of the creditor to whom you owe the money and how to proceed if you don't think you owe the money.

- If a debt collector is trying to collect more than one debt from you, the collector must apply any payment you make to the debt you select. Equally important, a debt collector may not apply a payment to a debt you don't think you owe.

- If an attorney is representing you about the debt, the debt col-



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lector must contact the attorney rather than you. If you don't have an attorney, a collector may contact other people only to find out your address, your phone number and where you work.

- Debt collectors may not harass, oppress or abuse you or any third parties they contact about you.

- A debt collector may not lie or mislead anyone when collecting a debt. For example, a debt collector may not threaten to have you arrested.

Where Do I Report Violations?

If you think that a debt collector has violated the law, report it to the FTC. File your complaint at www.ftc.gov/complaint. Your complaint gives law enforcement a lead to follow up on and may stop it from happening to someone else.

For more tips on credit and debt, visit www.ftc.gov/MoneyMatters or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357).