

MONEY MATTERS



Manage Your Credit Health And Become Fiscally Fit

(NAPSA)—If you feel sick, you visit the doctor. The same applies to financial health. If you're considering a big purchase—a home, a car—it's a good idea to look at your credit report. If it's in good shape, you'll feel confident. If there are inaccuracies, you'll have time to get them resolved—before they cause you problems.

A credit report lists your name, address, Social Security number, birthdate, bill payment history and companies which have requested your credit file. Also included are public record details such as whether you have filed for bankruptcy or have a judgment or lien.

Information in the report comes from your creditors or court houses. Credit reporting agencies compile the information for businesses with authorized access to your credit report. They determine whether to grant you credit, insurance or employment.

Information in credit reports is also used to determine your credit score. The scores are a snapshot of your credit risk. The higher your credit score, the more likely you are to be approved for loans and receive favorable rates.

Though there are several factors that go into a credit score, such as credit card balances and loans in relation to credit limits, the timely payment of your bills is the single most important factor in determining that credit score.

"The credit reporting system in the U.S. is the envy of the world. Nowhere else can citizens buy a car over their lunch hour or pre-qualify for a mortgage on the phone in less than an hour," said John Ford, Equifax chief privacy officer. "Without such a system, can you imagine how much time and energy you



Keeping track of activity in your credit report is key to financial stability.

would spend trying to convince a credit grantor you're creditworthy?"

Check your credit report at least twice a year. This is important information that creditors are reviewing about you; you should know what they know. The reports are not static, new information is added all the time. More important, it's to protect yourself against identity theft, where someone fraudulently uses your personal information to establish credit, purchase goods and services with your credit cards, apply for new credit cards in your name or commit other crimes.

To get started, contact Equifax for a copy of your credit report. Or subscribe to Equifax's Credit Watch credit report monitoring service that alerts you to any new activity on your report. Visit www.equifax.com, write Equifax, P.O. Box 740241, Atlanta, GA 30374 or call (800) 685-1111.