

Take Control Of Your Financial Future

(NAPSA)—It's always a good time to avoid financial pitfalls and get your finances on the right track by using these five tips:

1. Get a Grip on Saving Versus Spending. According to a recent survey, 61 percent of respondents reported facing difficulties covering monthly expenses and paying bills. Track your monthly spending, balance your checkbook regularly and opt out of programs that automatically approve ATM and debit card transactions.

2. Plan for Known—and Unknown—Expenses. The survey found that only 35 percent of American adults have set aside sufficient emergency savings to cover financial emergencies. Being able to weather unexpected financial shocks not only contributes to your own financial stability but helps the stability of the economy as a whole. Aim to set aside at least one month (and preferably three to six months) of your current salary in a federally insured savings account—and don't touch it unless absolutely necessary.

3. Take Advantage of Tax Breaks for College and Retirement Savings. The survey found that less than a third of respondents with financially dependent children set money aside for college. Consider opening a tax-advantaged savings account, such as a 529 Plan or Coverdell Education Savings Account. Contributing to a retirement plan, say a 401(k) or IRA, can mean the difference between a financially secure retirement and running out of money. These plans offer tax benefits and the opportunity for your savings to compound over time. If you have an IRA, you can make a contribution now. If you have a 401(k) plan at work, sign up today and start saving.

4. Look Around—and Look Out—Before Making Financial Decisions. When it comes to choosing financial products—such as credit cards, auto loans or mortgages—most Americans either do



It's a wise move to reassess your finances and your financial advisors regularly.

not comparison shop or conduct only limited searches for the best prices or terms. For example, 62 percent of survey respondents said they did not compare credit card offers. Whether for credit cards, loans or investments, comparing costs and terms can save you money.

5. Guard Your Wealth. According to the survey, only 14 percent of those who have worked with a financial professional reported that they had checked the professional's background or credentials with a state or federal regulator. Investing a few minutes of your time to take this essential step up front could save you time, money and other trouble down the road. To help you do this, there's FINRA Broker-Check—www.finra.org/broker-check—a free tool that lets investors check the professional background of brokerage firms and individual brokers. FINRA is the largest independent regulator for all securities firms doing business in the United States and offers tools and resources to help investors of any age and circumstance get on the right financial track.

"Families should take the time to take stock of their finances," advises Geraldine Walsh, FINRA's vice president for Investor Education.

For more information, visit www.finra.org/investors.