

## **CONSUMER FINANCIAL PROTECTION BUREAU: HELPING CONSUMERS HELP THEMSELVES**

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) was created in the wake of the financial crisis to stand up for consumers and make sure they are treated fairly in the consumer financial marketplace. Helping consumers help themselves with tools and financial education is core to the Bureau carrying out its mission.

Consumers can contact the CFPB to get help if they have a problem with a financial product or service. The CFPB also works directly with consumers to help them avoid financial problems by giving them the resources they need to better understand products. The Bureau aims to provide consumers with the tools they need to plan for the future and reach their financial goals.

### **CONSUMER RESPONSE**

As a federal agency and financial industry regulator, the CFPB helps make it possible for consumers to raise their voices and be heard by financial companies. Consumers that have an issue with a consumer financial product or service can submit a complaint to the CFPB and the Bureau will work to get them a response, generally within 15 days. The CFPB accepts complaints about credit cards, mortgages, bank accounts and services, student loans, credit reporting, money transfers, debt collection, payday loans, vehicle and other consumer loans, prepaid cards, debt settlement services, and pawn and title loans. Consumers can submit a complaint online, by phone, via fax or mail. After submitting a complaint to the Bureau, consumers have gotten their credit reports fixed, stopped harassing calls from debt collectors, and more. Some have even gotten money back.

### **Handling Consumer Complaints**

Once a consumer submits a complaint, the Bureau will forward the complaint to the company and work to get consumers a response, generally within 15 days. Companies are expected to close all but the most complicated complaints within 60 days. The Bureau provides consumers with a tracking number for their complaint so that they can keep tabs on where it is in the process. When the company responds, consumers can review the response and give the CFPB feedback. If another government agency would be better able to assist, CFPB will forward the complaint to that agency and let the consumer know.

Since the Bureau launched in July 2011, it has received over 650,000 complaints. As of July 1, 2015, these include:

- 183,200 mortgage
- 162,100 debt collection
- 98,900 credit reporting
- 73,500 credit card
- 67,100 bank accounts and services
- 24,800 consumer loan

- 18,800 private student loan
- 9,500 payday loan
- 4,000 money transfer
- 2,200 prepaid card
- 1,600 other financial service

### **Consumer Complaint Database**

The CFPB's Consumer Complaint Database is the nation's largest public collection of federal consumer financial complaints. The database allows the public to see what consumers complained about and why, as well as how and when the company in question responds. Consumers can search the CFPB's public complaint database based on a number of specific search criteria, including: company name or financial product. Consumers can also aggregate and download the data. Personal information is not included in the public database, to protect the identity of the consumer. Data is updated nightly.

### **Tell Your Story**

The CFPB hears from consumers about their experiences in the marketplace – good or bad – even if they do not have a formal complaint. The Tell Your Story tool provides a space where consumers can share this information, helping the Bureau to learn more about their everyday experiences, for example when buying a home, starting to bank, or taking out a loan. Consumers' stories give the Bureau insight into how to better protect consumers and create a fairer marketplace.

### **KNOW BEFORE YOU OWE**

The CFPB is working to help consumers navigate the marketplace. The Bureau's *Know Before You Owe* campaign for clear financial disclosures makes the costs, risks, and terms of financial products and services easier to understand.

### **Financial Aid Shopping Sheet**

The CFPB worked with the Department of Education to create the Financial Aid Shopping Sheet, a model financial aid offer letter that provides students and their families with a personalized depiction of their total cost of attendance, presented in a standardized, single-page letter that empowers consumers to compare offers from different schools. Currently, approximately 3,000 colleges have voluntarily adopted the Financial Aid Shopping Sheet.

### **Mortgage Loan Estimate**

In November 2013, the CFPB finalized a rule creating a single, shorter, more useful mortgage disclosure form (the mortgage Loan Estimate, which consumers receive no more than three days after they apply for a mortgage). The new, simpler form will help make the costs and risks of a mortgage clearer so that consumers can choose the loan that best meets their needs.

### **Mortgage Closing Disclosure**

In November 2013, the CFPB finalized a rule combining the forms that a borrower is given when closing on a mortgage. Consumers will receive the new Closing Disclosure at least three business days before closing on a loan so they have time to review their loan terms and costs in an unpressured environment rather than at the closing table. In addition to summarizing the final loan terms and cost, the Closing Disclosure provides consumers with a detailed accounting of their transaction.

## **CONSUMER RESOURCES**

Through innovative technology and education, the CFPB can help address consumer problems and can empower consumers to make sound financial decisions in the future. The Bureau has worked to create tools and to provide services that will help consumers help themselves to reach their financial goals.

### **Ask CFPB**

Ask CFPB is an interactive online tool that has a searchable database of more than 1,000 questions most frequently asked by consumers about common financial questions. The tool has answers to questions on many financial products and services, from student loans, prepaid cards, and debt collection, to credit scores, money transfer, mortgages, and many more. Ask CFPB also provides helpful definitions to translate industry jargon and offers general information and explanations for financial terms.

### **Free Consumer Publications**

The CFPB has developed informational publications for consumers, including brochures, worksheets, and guides on numerous topics, from credit to money management to mortgages. Many of these publications are available in multiple languages and can either be downloaded for free or printed copies can be ordered in various quantities.

## **Mortgages**

### **Owning a Home**

In January 2015, the Bureau released a suite of tools to inform and empower consumers shopping for a mortgage. These tools help consumers throughout the home buying experience, from the very start of the process all the way to the closing table. Tools include a guide to loan options, an interactive tool to help consumers explore interest rates and set realistic expectations, and a closing checklist and guide to closing forms. We are working to add additional tools over the course of the year.

### **Find a Housing Counselor**

The CFPB launched a tool to help consumers find local housing counseling agencies near them to answer their questions or address their concerns.

### **New Mortgage Rule Resources for Consumers**

The Bureau released many different educational materials to educate the public about their rights and protections under the CFPB's new mortgage rules. These include:

- [Ready to buy a home?](#)
- [Shopping for a mortgage](#)
- [Have a mortgage? What you can expect under federal rules](#)

### **Mortgage Servicer Sample Letters**

The CFPB provides sample letters with a template for consumers who are looking to contact their mortgage servicer.

- [Sample letter to correct errors](#)
- [Sample letter to request information](#)

## **Student Loans**

### **Paying for College**

CFPB put together tools and resources to help consumers make the best decisions for themselves and their families. Paying for College has information for students who are attending college soon, are current students, or have already taken out student loans. Through this suite of tools, consumers can compare financial aid offers and better understand student loan repayment options.

- [Repay Student Debt](#): An easy-to-use, unbiased resource for borrowers to successfully repay their federal and private student loans. The tool assists borrowers with signing up for income-driven repayment plans and has a selection of sample letters borrowers can send to their student loan servicers.
- [Managing Your College Money](#): An action guide to provide college students with a roadmap of their options for choosing various bank products and services, and tips on how to access their student loans and scholarships.
- [Choosing a Student Loan](#): This guide helps college students and their families shop for student loans. It helps borrowers understand the differences between federal and private loans, as well as how to find the best rates.
- [Compare Financial Aid Offers](#): This tool allows students to compare offers between prospective colleges and project how much their monthly payment might be after graduation. The tool works with the Financial Aid Shopping Sheet.

### **Consumer advisory: [Borrowers Don't Have to Pay Someone to Help with a Student Loan](#)**

Borrowers sometimes think that the quickest way to deal with their student loan debt is to pay someone to contact their creditor. When it comes to federal student loans, this probably isn't the best choice.

### **Consumer advisory: [Student loan debt relief companies may cost you thousands of dollars and drive you further into debt](#)**

This consumer advisory provides student loan borrowers with common warning signs to spot a student loan debt relief scam.

### **Consumer advisory: [Avoid Getting Sidetracked by Student Loan Servicers](#)**

The CFPB released this advisory to help students communicate to their servicers and ask them that they direct any extra payments toward their highest-rate loan.

### **Consumer advisory: [Accessing Scholarships and Student Loan Funds](#)**

This consumer advisory addresses students who are expecting to receive scholarship and student loan proceeds on – what appears to be – a school-endorsed debit card.

### **Consumer advisory: [Co-signers Can Cause Surprise Defaults on Private Student Loans](#)**

Consumers can avoid surprise defaults by pursuing a co-signer release. The Bureau released sample letters that consumers can edit and send to their student loan servicers.

## **Managing Finances**

### **How to Stop Mystery Credit Card Fees**

For consumers considering whether they want add-on products, the CFPB points out some things to consider.

### **[Determining Overdraft Coverage](#)**

Institutions can't charge consumers for overdrafts on ATM or point-of-sale debit card transactions unless the consumer has opted in. This advisory highlights steps consumers can take to reduce or eliminate overdraft fees.

### **[Tips When Using Mobile Devices for Financial Services](#)**

Many consumers use mobile devices for financial services to save time. The Bureau gives tips for using a mobile device more safely.

### **[Four Steps to Take if Credit or Debit Card Data was Hacked](#)**

The Bureau lets consumers know what they can do to protect themselves if they spot fraudulent charges on a credit or debit card.

### **[Preparing Finances for Emergencies](#)**

This advisory helps consumers think about what they should do to protect their accounts and financial information in case of an emergency.

### **[Protecting and Rebuilding Finances After a Disaster](#)**

After the shock of a disaster, consumers must make many complex financial choices. The Bureau lists ways consumers can help protect themselves from scams and save money.

### **[Debt Collection Action Letters](#)**

The CFPB published five action letters that consumers can consider using when replying to debt collectors. The letters address the following situations when the consumer:

- [Needs more information on the debt](#)
- [Wants to dispute the debt and for the debt collector to prove responsibility](#)
- [Wants to restrict how and when a debt collector can contact them](#)
- [Has hired a lawyer](#)
- [Wants the debt collector to stop any and all contact](#)
- [Receives income from Social Security, VA benefits or other federal benefits protected from garnishment](#)

## **Older Americans**

### **[Managing Someone Else's Money](#)**

Millions of Americans are managing money or property for a loved one who is unable to pay bills or make financial decisions. This can be very overwhelming but it's also a great opportunity to help protect them from scams and fraud. The CFPB released four easy-to-understand booklets to help financial caregivers. The *Managing Someone Else's Money* guides are for agents under powers of attorney, court-appointed guardians, trustees, and government fiduciaries (Social Security representative payees and VA fiduciaries). Available in Spanish too.

### **[Money Smart for Older Adults: Participant Guide](#) and [Instructor Guide](#)**

Money Smart for Older Adults is an instructor-led training curriculum developed jointly by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and the CFPB. The program raises awareness among older adults and their caregivers on how to prevent elder financial exploitation. The program encourages advance planning and informed financial decision-making. Available in Spanish, too.

### **[3 Things to Keep Retirement Plan on Track](#)**

The Bureau offers some tips for older homeowners who carry mortgage debt so that they can focus on retirement.

### **[Know Your Financial Advisor](#)**

The Bureau encourages consumers to check an adviser's background before trusting the adviser to help them make important financial decisions. Not all titles or credentials for retirement or "senior" financial planning are the same.

### **[Four things older Americans can do about debt collection problems](#)**

The Bureau offers help to older consumers having problems with debt collectors.

### **[Consumer advisory: Your benefits are protected from garnishment](#)**

The Bureau advises older consumers about rules that protect their federal benefits from private debt collectors.

### **[Consumer advisory: 3 pension advance traps to avoid](#)**

The Bureau advises older consumers to be wary of common traps associated with pension advance loans.

### **[Consumer advisory: Three steps you should take if you have a reverse mortgage](#)**

In response to consumer complaints submitted to the CFPB about reverse mortgages, the Bureau advises older borrowers to: 1.) verify who is on the loan; 2.) make a plan for a non-borrowing spouse; and 3.) make plans for any non-borrowers living in the home.

## **[Servicemembers](#)**

### **[What Military Families Should Know About Payday Loans](#)**

The CFPB accepts complaints on payday loans, and encourages servicemembers who have complaints to submit them to the Bureau.

### **[Servicemembers Have New Mortgage Protections](#)**

The new mortgage rules that went into effect in January 2014 had provisions to help protect servicemembers, such as restrictions on dual tracking, no more runarounds and missing documents, and help for troubled borrowers.

### **[Guide for Servicemembers Tackling Student Loan Debt](#)**

The CFPB offers tips to servicemembers for managing student loan debt.

### **[On-Demand e-Learning](#)**

The CFPB hosts an ongoing series of virtual Military Financial Educator Forums on consumer financial topics for service providers who deliver financial, educational, or legal counseling to servicemembers and their families on military installations worldwide.

### **[Consumer advisory: Choosing a Financial Professional](#)**

This advisory encourages servicemembers and veterans to check the financial adviser's background before deciding where to get help in making important financial decisions. Not all titles or credentials for financial professionals are the same.

**Consumer advisory: [Are unpaid debts a military career-killer?](#)**

Military personnel who have trouble handling their personal finances can very quickly find their duty status, potential promotions and even military careers in jeopardy. And, over time, the lingering burden of debt can add stress to their personal relationships and damage their credit profile. This advisory helps military consumers think about what they might do to when a financial problem arises.

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*The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is a 21st century agency that helps consumer finance markets work by making rules more effective, by consistently and fairly enforcing those rules, and by empowering consumers to take more control over their economic lives. For more information, visit [www.consumerfinance.gov](http://www.consumerfinance.gov).*