

MEMBERSFIRST CREDIT UNION

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Scam Alert: USPS Mailbox Theft and Check Washing

When Midge Laurin, of Chicago, Illinois, mailed out a \$30 check, she had no idea it would be intercepted by a scammer and written out to someone else to the tune of \$9,475.

Check-washing scams like this are on the rise and can leave victims struggling to reclaim their lost funds for months. Here's what you need to know about these scams and how to avoid them.

How the scams play out

In a check-washing scam, the target places a check in the mail, and it is then stolen by scammers who take envelopes from private mailboxes or lift them out of public mailboxes using "fishing rods" made of string attached to a sticky substance. With check in hand, the scammer uses ordinary household chemicals, like acetone or bleach, to erase the ink from the stolen check. Finally, they'll rewrite the amount and/or the payee before depositing the check into their own account.

Sometimes, the scammer will take the ruse one step further by using the checking account details found on the check to commit further crimes against the check-writer. This may include producing counterfeit checks or a fake driver's license, passport or other ID in the victim's name. The victim may only learn about these crimes when they begin receiving overdraft notices or are informed that their ID is no longer valid.

Protect yourself

Unfortunately, check washing may not be discovered for weeks or even months after its occurrence. Sometimes, the victim will only learn of the ruse when they review their monthly checking account statement and see that the check amount and/or payee has been altered. Or they may only find out about it when the intended recipient reaches out to let the check writer know they still have not received the check. The scam's discovery is more likely to be delayed when the scammers have not modified any information on the check and have simply stolen and deposited a check made out to "cash."

In addition, many financial institutions do not offer complete protection against fraud that is not reported within a few days of its occurrence. Some offer partial protection for up to 60 days.

Law enforcement agencies on local and federal levels, including the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and the FBI, have task forces to help stop check washing. They offer the following strategies for keeping your checks and your information safe from scams:

- Whenever possible, use mobile and online banking services and P2P systems as a replacement for checks.
- When writing checks, use black ink, preferably the gel kind. The ink found in blue ballpoint pens can be easily removed with acetone.
- Don't raise your mailbox flag when there are bill payments inside. Hand this mail directly to your carrier or mail it from the post office.
- Retrieve your mail daily and never leave the mailbox full overnight. If you'll be traveling, you can arrange for the post office to hold your mail for up to 30 days. Alternatively, have a friend or trusted neighbor retrieve your mail, so it doesn't pile up.
- When mailing checks, use envelopes that have security tinting.
- Shred or burn all canceled checks, checks deposited through your mobile app, credit card statements and bills.
- Review your checking account activity frequently. Ensure all checks have cleared for the correct amount and to the correct payee. You can generally access this information through your financial institution's mobile banking app or website.
- Store your checks in a secure place within your home.
- Avoid making checks out to "cash." Instead, write out your checks to a specific person or business.

Check washing can wreak havoc on a victim's finances before they even know it's occurred. Follow the tips outlined here to keep your checks safe. As always, keep an eye on transactions and statements, and report any unusual activity.



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FREE TRIAL SCAMS

The FTC is warning of an uptick in free trial scams, which come in several shapes and sizes. However, most will look something like this:

You see an ad from a company saying you've been granted a temporary subscription to their product, absolutely free. The only catch? Supposedly none, until you're asked to pay for hidden fees that are more than shipping and handling. By then, it's too late to back out.

Alternatively, you might be asked to share your financial information even though you're officially not obligated to pay anything.

In short, there's hardly a "free trial" that won't cost you big.

In one such scam, a company aggressively advertised "free trials" for health care products on various popular websites. The lucky consumer would only need to pay enough to cover shipping and handling, and the product would be delivered – absolutely free!

Sadly, many unlucky victims of this scam paid close to \$200 in fees before the first shipment was sent out. Worse yet, they were charged this same fee each month for the next year.

Here's how to steer clear of free trial scams:

- **Do your research.** A quick online search of the company name with words like "scam" or "negative review" should give you an idea of what the business is all about.
- **Read the fine print.** Don't purchase anything without reading all terms and conditions of the offer.

- **Look for an exit strategy.** Is there a way to change your mind? If you only have a small pocket of time to cancel, you might be looking at a scam.
- **Always review your credit card and checking account statements.** This way, you'll spot anything suspicious, and you'll be able to determine if you can back out of a shady deal.
- **Don't share sensitive information online.** It only takes a few moments for your private information to become very public.
- **Check URLs.** When signing up for a free trial, you'll be redirected to a new site. Check the URL of the webpage and determine if it matches the company you are allegedly dealing with.
- **Ignore urgent calls to action.** If an ad urges you to "act now!" or claims an offer will expire momentarily, it's likely a scam.

It's also important to be sure you fully understand the payment requirements of legitimate products and services you subscribe to. Some offer a short period of time to test a product (makeup, coffee services, apps, etc.) and immediately deduct charges once the trial period is over. Avoid being charged for a product or service you're not entirely happy with by setting a reminder to return the item or cancel the trial at least a week prior to the deadline.

Stay alert, and don't let what should be a free trial cost you big!



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DEVICE ADVICE: HOW TO KEEP YOUR PHONE SAFE FROM FRAUD

Smartphones are an answer to a disorganized life. You can buy practically anything with just a few swipes, schedule your appointments and store all your photos and home videos in this one, convenient location. [You can also manage your accounts, check your balance and deposit checks through MembersFirst Credit Union's mobile banking app.] Unfortunately, all that convenience comes at a price: your mobile devices pose an inherent risk to your security if they fall into the wrong hands. The good news is that there are ways to protect your phone and your information from fraud.

Here are six tips for keeping your device safe and secure.

Keep your phone locked

If your entire life is on your phone, you run the risk of giving up complete access to your identity if your phone is stolen or misplaced. The best way to prevent this from happening is to have a lock on your screen. Opt for a physical lock if possible, such as fingerprint or face recognition, meaning no number of automated password attempts can open your phone. Consider installing a tracking device/app on your phone as well to help you locate it and retrieve or erase the data if it gets misplaced. Finally, adjust your phone's lock settings so the screen automatically locks after the shortest amount of time being idle.

Choose strong, unique passwords across all your devices and apps

Passwords should be a blend of letters with varied capitalization use, numbers and symbols. Be sure to use a different password for each of your devices, apps and other online accounts, and change up your passwords approximately every six months. Don't store the info for all your passwords in one location on your phone or have your device "remember" your passwords. If you find it challenging to recall all your passwords and login credentials, you may benefit from a password manager like Sticky Password or LastPass.

Browse safely

Follow these rules for safe online browsing:

- Look for the padlock icon and the "s" after the "http" in the URL of each landing page you visit to ensure it's a secure site.
- Never share your personally identifiable information (PII) with an unknown contact.
- If an alleged representative of MembersFirst Credit Union reaches out to you regarding an issue with your account and you're unsure of whether this contact is legit, reach out to us directly through a secure channel to confirm your suspicions.
- Don't store your credit card info in online shopping accounts.
- Keep your security settings current.
- Avoid clicking on pop-up ads or links in emails from unverified senders.

Use secure Wi-Fi

The first thing many people do when they sit down in a restaurant, at a bar or almost anywhere is search for free Wi-Fi access. It's an easy way to save on data, so why not? Simply put, using public Wi-Fi makes you vulnerable to hacking. It's best not to use public Wi-Fi at all, especially

when banking online. To keep your device safe while using public Wi-Fi, connect to a virtual private network (VPN). Changing your virtual network will protect your location and sensitive information from scammers. In addition, be sure to keep your own Wi-Fi locked to prevent strangers from accessing your network.

Encrypt your data

Your phone stores loads of your PII, which can make you vulnerable to identity theft if it's stolen or misplaced. Protect your information by encrypting all sensitive data on your phone. Most phones have encryption settings, which you can enable easily.

To encrypt data on an Apple® device, go to the settings menu, choose "Touch ID & Passcode" from the pop-up menu and follow the prompts to unlock your phone. When you've gained access, scroll down until you see the words "Data Protection." If this feature is not enabled, enable it now. Your data is now unreadable.

If you own an Android™ phone, charge your phone at least 80% and unroot it. Next, go to your security settings and choose "Encrypt Phone" from the menu. Encryption may take an hour or more.

Install antivirus software on your phone

The same antivirus programs that protect your laptop can also keep your phone secure. Check out security programs for phones, like McAfee or Norton 360. Antivirus software will provide your phone with protection from security breaches and attacks from scammers.

If you believe your device has been compromised and/or you're vulnerable to identity theft, notify MembersFirst Credit Union immediately. Alert the FTC as well.

Smartphones bring a lot of convenience into our lives, but they carry an inherent security risk. Use the tips outlined here to keep your device safe from fraud.





Visa Balance Transfer

Tell high-rate credit card debt to take a hike! Transfer balances to a MembersFirst Visa® Credit Card with rates as low as **8.99% APR!*** Plus, there's **no balance transfer fee**, saving you an average of 3-5%.

Why carry a MembersFirst Visa Credit Card?

- Our low, non-variable rates start at just 8.99% APR on Visa Platinum
- Earn 1 ScoreCard® Rewards point for every dollar you spend
- Convenient 24/7 access to your account
- No annual fee on Visa Classic and Platinum options
- No balance transfer fee
- No default rate

Transfer to a MembersFirst Visa Credit Card today!

Explore your options and apply at membersfirstga.com/credit-cards.

*APR=Annual Percentage Rate. Subject to credit approval. Rates as of 3/9/23 are 8.99% APR for the Visa Platinum Credit Card and 13.88% APR for the Visa Classic Credit Card. All credit union loan programs, rates, terms and conditions are subject to change at any time without notice. See membersfirstga.com/credit-cards for more on our credit card programs.

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CU HAPPENINGS!

HOLIDAY CLOSINGS

Memorial Day
Monday, May 29, 2023

Independence Day
Tuesday, July 4, 2023

**Juneteenth National
Independence Day**
Monday, June 19, 2023

Labor Day
Monday, September 4, 2023



We're working hard to give back to our friends and communities. Check out these CU Happenings – happening all around us!

Read Across America

Volunteers visited classrooms to share thousands of stories across Paulding County and the U.S. during national Read Across America Week. Here, you can see little faces waiting with anticipation and wonder as the page is turned. Sweet second-grader Maddie rests her hand on her grandmother's knee as she and her classmates in Mrs. Adkins' class at McGarity Elementary listen intently to the story Business Development Officer Angie Holland shares with them.



Lucky to Have Our Members

During our visit at Emory Decatur Hospital – already decorated for St. Patrick's Day – we found Branch Manager Cyrita Chappell helping our longtime member Kim Brooks find her perfect "Pot of Gold" within her MembersFirst benefits. Thanks for being a wonderful member, Mrs. Brooks, and thank you, Cyrita, for all that you do for our members!



SCCPSS Teacher of the Year

What a wonderful night of celebration as the 2024 Teacher of the Year award was presented to Mrs. Raegan Dillon, a teacher at STEM Academy at Bartlett Middle School. Each year, the school system hosts a gala to honor and celebrate the teacher of the year at each school. MembersFirst was the proud reception sponsor of this prestigious event. Congratulations to all!

Pictured: Ashley DuBois of MembersFirst and 2024 Teacher of the Year, Raegan Dillon.



Wellstar Wellness Days

LeeAnn and Lily joined in the fun of Wellness Day at Wellstar Windy Hill Hospital. Wellstar provides these opportunities at many locations throughout the year to allow team members the opportunity to make the most of their benefits at work. Those who stopped by the MFCU table received a treat and valuable information about their financial wellness benefit. We're so glad to contribute to the reason why Wellstar is a top place to work!



Locations and Contact Information

Call Center

METRO ATLANTA
Phone (404) 978-0080
Fax (404) 978-0095

COASTAL GEORGIA
Phone (912) 352-2902
Fax (912) 352-0838

Branch Locations

Visit a branch near you.

Atlanta, Austell, Decatur, Douglasville, Hiram, Marietta, Newnan, Pooler, Sandy Springs and Savannah.

Main Office

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CU SUCCEED SCHOLARSHIP DRAWING

Congratulations to our latest CU Succeed Scholarship recipients, Markeisha B. and Alexander S.! These lucky winners have each received \$250 toward tuition and college expenses. Our next drawing will be in June 2023, so be sure to share those impressive report cards and transcripts with us!

For more information on the CU Succeed program for teens and young adults, visit membersfirstga.com.