



## Protect Your Social Security Number

In a real estate or mortgage transaction, when does a home buyer need to make his or her social security number available and to who? Theft or misuse of a social security number is serious, mainly because it isn't always immediately discovered. Thieves can use someone's number to establish credit and pay their own bills, among other things.

Who has a right to *demand* a social security number? The Internal Revenue Service, banks, employers, and stock brokers (when you open a new account). They use a social security number to establish identity, to verify the accuracy of a financial history, and to report legally required tax information

The entities that *ask* for a social security number: video rental stores, utilities, schools, doctors' offices, health clubs, and others. "What many people don't know is that they don't have to give their numbers to these organizations," says Jerry Frate, president of Rochester Area Mortgage Services, Inc.

So, when it comes down to a mortgage broker, what should a homebuyer do? "If a potential client is simply shopping around and interviewing mortgage brokers, disclosure of the social security number is not necessary," Frate says.

But after a broker is selected and the paperwork and credit check need to begin, that's when it is necessary to provide a social security number. In turn, mortgage brokers use the social security number to conduct credit checks with reputable credit-reporting agencies - TransUnion, Equifax and Experian are the big three - that carefully guard and protect the submitted numbers.

Frate adds that it's not a bad idea for a client to ask a mortgage broker how a social security number will be used and who will see it.

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