

Orinda Sees Increase in Credit Card, Identity Theft

By Chris Lavin

Orinda has seen such an increase in identity and credit card thefts that officials have had to remove the paper recycling bins from the post office.

“You wouldn’t believe what people throw away,” said Lily Cleope, officer in charge of the Orinda Post Office. “They throw away credit card renewals, everything. Anyone can take them.”

Such easily available material for would-be thieves has led to a “definite increase” in criminal activity, Cleope said. And while identity theft – when a person’s personal information such as Social Security number, home phone number and address are used to gain credit in order to buy things under another’s name – and credit card theft are different crimes, one can lead to another.

“You just don’t want your personal information in a recycling bin,” Cleope said. “If the customers would just take their mail home it would save a whole lot of problems.”

Orinda police have noticed such an increase that the office recently published a pamphlet informing consumers what to do if their credit or identity is compromised, and advises Orinda residents on how to prevent it. It is available free at the station at 14 Altarinda Road.

“One of the biggest cases we had was a lady who got a resident’s Social Security number, opened up an account at a different bank and the resident didn’t even know about it until she got a statement in the mail,” said Paul Rives, assistant to the chief.

Orinda residents who find they have been burgled by credit card or identity theft are asked to come and file a report at the station. Officers then ask a volunteer to work on the case to find out how a card was used, and when.

“Credit card theft is one of the most common thefts we see,” Rives said. Ice cream parlors are a popular destination for credit card thieves, for some reason, he said, “but then they might go buy a plasma screen TV 20 minutes later.”

According to Rives, the department is working with area merchants to use surveillance cameras to track down suspects who used a stolen card at a particular time and place.

“It takes a lot of time,” he said.

Cleope said she has seen an increase in the number of thefts from home mail boxes, as well. Rives agreed. “There is lots of expendable income here,” he said. “There are people out there trying to take advantage of the people we have.”

Cleope is working with her delivery staff to keep an eye on residential houses. “We know when people are on vacation, so we can call the police if we see something suspicious,” she said.

Both Cleope and Rives recommend caution.

“You know those credit cards that you must activate from your home phone?” Cleope asked. “I heard of a woman who got a flower delivery – this person had dressed up like a florist delivery person and got some flowers – but when the customer said it must be a mistake, the delivery person asked to use the phone to call the florist and check the address. The woman let her in, and she went in and activated a stolen card from her home phone number. You just don’t know the ideas these people come up with.”

Rives recommends making a label for the back of credit cards asking merchants to check a photo ID before completing a purchase.

“And come by and pick up a pamphlet,” he said.



Lily Cleope with “left behind mail”

Photo by Tod Fierner

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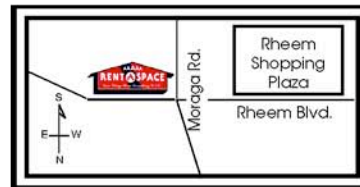


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