Preparing For Change: Legal and Regulatory Challenges and Opportunities for Credit Counseling Agencies

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<u>Starting Friday, May 28 a copy of this presentation will be available for</u> <u>download at www.Venable.com/ccds/publications, along with articles on</u> <u>many of these topics.</u>



Introduction

- Consumer Financial Products and Services Oversight
 - Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2009 (H.R. 4173)
 - Restoring American Financial Stability Act of 2010 (S. 3217)
- Debt Settlement Legislation
 - Schumer-McCaskill Debt Settlement Amendment
 - Debt Settlement Consumer Protection Act
 - GAO Report
- Federal Trade Commission
 - Debt Relief Services Rulemaking
 - Mortgage Assistance Relief Services Rulemaking
 - Other Developments

- Internal Revenue Service
 - Chief Counsel Memorandum and 501(q)
- Bankruptcy Counseling
 - Whitehouse Medical Bankruptcy Amendment
- Housing Counseling
- State Debt Adjusting Law and Related Developments
- Questions and Answers





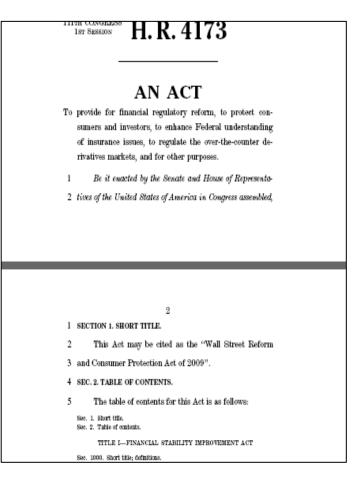
Consumer Financial Products and Services Oversight



Congress is poised to enact financial services regulatory reform legislation this year that would, among other things, provide greater federal oversight of financial services provided to consumers.



Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2009 (H.R. 4173)



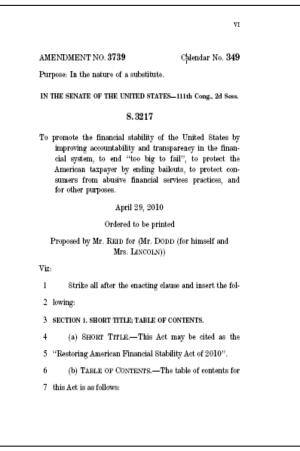


Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2009 (H.R. 4173)

- The House-passed version of financial services regulatory reform (H.R. 4173, passed the House on Dec. 11, 2009) establishes a Consumer Financial Protection Agency (CFPA) that also would have regulatory oversight over counseling agencies, debt settlement and other financial products and services.
- Also, the House-passed bill has some provisions requiring the CFPA to promote financial education and counseling. Here are some examples:
 - requiring the CFPA to establish a unit to conduct research on consumer financial counseling and education, including "exploring effective methods, tools, and approaches" and "identifying ways to incorporate new technology for the delivery and evaluation of financial counseling and education efforts".
 - requiring the CFPA to establish an Office of Financial Literacy that will "develop goals for programs to be provided by persons that provide consumer financial education and counseling, including programs through which such persons provide one-on-one financial counseling . . ."
 - requiring the CFPA's Office of Financial Literacy to "develop a marketing strategy to promote financial education and one-on-one counseling"
- Broadly expands FTC authority.
 - APA rulemaking authority
 - Enforcement Authority for "Substantial Assistance" Violations.
 - Litigation Authority
 - Civil Penalty



Restoring American Financial Stability Act of 2010 (S. 3217)





Restoring American Financial Stability Act of 2010 (S. 3217)

- The Senate passed S. 3217, Title X of which would establish a Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection.
- Section 1002(13)(A)(vii) defines "(I) providing credit counseling to any consumer; and (II) providing services to assist a consumer with debt management or debt settlement, modifying the terms of any extension of credit, or avoiding foreclosure" as a "financial product or service" over which the Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection would have regulatory jurisdiction.
- Also, Section 1013(d) requires the Director of the Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection to establish an Office of Financial Literacy "which shall be responsible for developing and implementing initiatives intended to educate and empower consumers to make better informed financial decisions."
 - Office of Financial Literacy shall "develop and implement a strategy to improve the financial literacy of consumers that includes measurable goals and objectives, in consultation with the Financial Literacy and Education Commission, consistent with the National Strategy for Financial Education, through activities including providing opportunities for consumers to access ... financial counseling."
- In addition, Section 1075 amends the Financial Education and Counseling Grant Program established in the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 by expanding the target audience beyond potential homebuyers to economically vulnerable individuals and families and deletes the 5 organization limit.



What will the future bring?

 In order to ensure success, the industry must have ready answers to key questions early in the process.



CFPA / CFPB

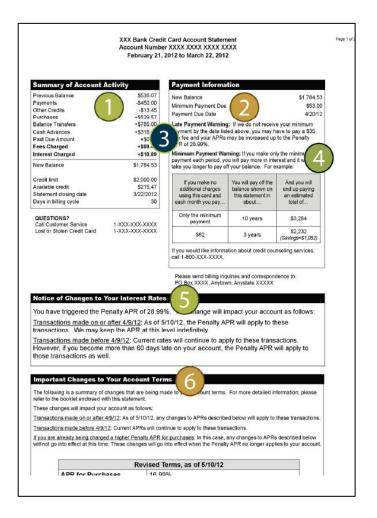
- What will the industry needs?
 - Empirical Data
 - Need for Rulemaking
 - Scope of Covered Practices
 - Scope of Covered Entities





Credit CARD Act of 2009

- The Credit Card Act required the Federal Reserve Board ("Board") to adopt guidelines for card issuers to provide a toll-free telephone number for obtaining credit counseling information.
- The Credit Card Act requires that these guidelines ensure that consumers are referred "only [to] those nonprofit and credit counseling agencies approved by a United States bankruptcy trustee pursuant to [11 U.S.C. 111(a)]."
- The Board requires that card issuers update information regarding approved organizations at least annually for consistency with the information provided by the United States Trustee or a bankruptcy administrator.
- The Final Rule went into effect on February 22, 2010.







Debt Settlement



Debt Settlement Consumer Protection Act

- Senator Schumer (D-NY) and Senator McCaskill (D-MO) filed their debt settlement amendment (based on their recently introduced "Debt Settlement Consumer Protection Act," S. 3264) to the financial services regulatory reform bill (S. 3217).
- The amendment and bill include:
 - Specific rules and prohibitions for debt settlement service providers
 - Fee Restrictions
 - Right of Cancelation
 - Disclosures
 - Private Right of Action for Violations
 - Grants the FTC express rulemaking authority for debt settlement services and debt relief services (broader).

- Specifically, the amendment (and the bill) provides:
 - an exception from the definition of "debt settlement provider" for nonprofit taxexempt credit counseling agencies, <u>i.e.</u>, "[a]n organization that is described in section 501(c)(3) and subject to section 501(q) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 and exempt from tax under section 501(a) of such Code" and
 - an exemption for the services provided by nonprofit taxexempt credit counseling agencies from any rules prescribed by the Federal Trade Commission regarding any debt relief services that are not otherwise covered by the provisions of the Amendment.
- H.R. 5387 filed by Rep. Gutierrez (D-IL), Rep. Ellison (D-MN) and Rep. Moore (D.-WI) on May 25, 2010.



GAO Report on Debt Settlement

	United States Government Accountability Office			
GAO	Testimony Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate			
For Release on Delivery Expected at 2:30 p.m. EDT Thursday, April 22, 2010	DEBT SETTLEMENT			
	Fraudulent, Abusive, and Deceptive Practices Pose Risk to Consumers			
	Statement of Gregory D. Kutz, Managing Director Forensic Audits and Special Investigations			
GA0-10-593T				

- GAO's investigation found that some debt settlement companies engage in fraudulent, deceptive, and abusive practices that pose a risk to consumers.
- 17 of 20 companies GAO called while posing as fictitious consumers say they collect fees before settling consumer debts--a practice FTC has labeled as harmful and proposed banning--while only 1 company said it collects most fees after it successfully settles consumer debt.
- GAO found some debt settlement companies provided fraudulent, deceptive, or questionable information to its fictitious consumers, such as claiming unusually high success rates for their programs--as high as 100 percent. FTC and state investigations have typically found that less than 10 percent of consumers successfully complete these programs.
- Other companies made claims linking their services to government programs.





Federal Trade Commission Developments



Federal Trade Commission Developments



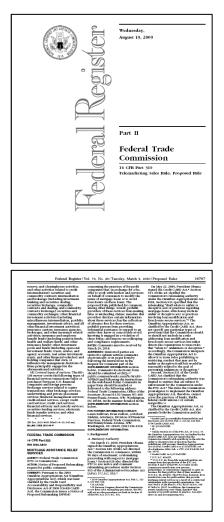
- Debt Relief Services
 Rulemaking (final rule
 expected within the next two months)
- Mortgage Rulemakings
- Updates on the FTC Red Flags Rule
- New Advertising Guidance Testimonials (Blogs and Social Media Targeted)
- Push for Greater Rulemaking Authority
- Stepped-up Enforcement



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FTC Targets Debt Relief Services and Mortgage Assistance Relief Services

- FTC rulemakings expected to be completed soon.
- No express coverage of bona fide nonprofit organizations
- Proposed Amendment to the Telemarketing Sales Rule for Debt **Relief Services**
 - Broad definition of "debt relief services"
 - Ban on "upfront" fees.
 - Disclosures
 - **Misrepresentations**
 - Covers inbound and outbound telephone calls
- Mortgage Assistance Relief Services
 - Ban on "upfront" fees.
 - Disclosures
 - **Misrepresentations**
 - Written contract requirements





 Guidance Available at: <u>http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/mi</u> <u>crosites/redflagsrule/index.sht</u> ml

FTC Red Flags Rule

- The FTC Red Flags Rule requires many businesses and organizations to implement a written Identity Theft Prevention Program designed to detect the warning signs – or "red flags" – of identity theft in their dayto-day operations.
- Are you covered by the Red Flags Rule?
- New Deadline for FTC regulated cover entities: June 1, 2010.

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Revisions to the FTC Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising

FTC GUIDES CONCERNING USE OF ENDORSEMENTS AND TESTIMONIALS IN ADVERTISING

Sec.255.0 Definitions.

- 255.1 General considerations.
- 255.2 Consumer endorsements
- 255.3 Expert endorsements. 255.4 Endorsements by organizations.
- 255.5 Disclosure of material connections.

Authority: 38 Stat. 717, as amended; 15 U.S.C. 41 - 58.

§255.0 Definitions.

(a) The Commission intends to treat endorsements and testimonials identically in the context of its enforcement of the Federal Trade Commission Act and for purposes of this part. The term endorsements is therefore generally used hereinafter to cover both terms and situations.

(b) For purposes of this part, an endorsement means any advertising message (including verbal statements, demonstrations, or depictions of the name, signature, likeness or other identifying personal characteristics of an individual or the name or seal of an organization) which message consumers are likely to believe reflects the opinions, beliefs, findings, or experience of a party other than the sponsoring advertiser. The party whose opinions, beliefs, findings, or experience the message appears to reflect will be called the endorser and may be an individual, group or institution.

(c) For purposes of this part, the term product includes any product, service, company or industry.

(d) For purposes of this part, an expert is an individual, group or institution possessing, as a result of experience, study or training, knowledge of a particular subject, which knowledge is superior to that generally acquired by ordinary individuals.



Background on FTC Guides for Endorsements and Testimonials

- Informal but very important statements of policy by the FTC in the field of advertising.
- Significant proposed changes affect:

(1) The use of consumer and expert endorsements; and

(2) The ability of advertisers to use "new media" endorsements such as bloggers and online message boards.



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Special Rules for Consumer Endorsements

- Consumer Endorsements are interpreted as representing that the endorser's experience is representative of what consumers will generally achieve.
- If the advertiser cannot substantiate that the endorser's experience is typical, the advertisement must clearly and conspicuously either:
 - (a) disclose what the generally expected performance would be in the depicted circumstances; or
 - (b) clarify the limited applicability of the endorser's experience.



Summary of Key Proposed Changes to FTC Testimonial Guides

- Expanded Definition of Endorsements
- Expanded Liability
 - Under the Commission's proposed changes, endorsers, as well as marketers, may be liable for statements made in the course of their endorsement.

The Death of the Disclaimer

- A statement by a consumer about his or her experience with the product is deemed to be a representation that other users of the product can expect the same experience.
- Many marketers do not have the facts necessary to support such a claim so they merely state that the experience of the testimonial is unique and that "Your Experience Will Vary."
- Disclosure of Connections: The New Frontier
- Social Media and Blogs



Internal Revenue Service





For Tax-Exempt CCAs Compliance with Section 501(q) of the Internal Revenue Code Remains Critical

- Are you engaged in credit counseling services as a substantial purpose? If so, 501(q) requirements:
 - Loans
 - Credit repair
 - Ability to pay
 - Board composition
 - Ownership
 - Referrals
 - Contributions
 - Debt management plan services revenue limit
- IRS Form 990 credit counseling services (Part IV, Line 9 and Schedule D, Part IV)
- Private Benefit and Private Inurement (e.g., Intermediate Sanctions)



March 30, 2010 IRS Chief Counsel Advice Memorandum

- First published IRS guidance regarding 501(q)
- Concludes that organizations that provide educational information on financial topics or provide financial counseling to homeowners who are at risk of foreclosure are providing "credit counseling services" within the meaning of 501(q). An organization that engages in such activities as a "substantial purpose" must comply with 501(q).



Housing Counseling Does Not Equal Negotiating the Making of Loans

- The IRS Chief Counsel Advice Memorandum concludes that the provision of housing counseling – including attempts to request repayment options, modify the terms of existing mortgages, modify interest rates, amortize amounts in default, and/or modify the period for paying off a mortgage – will not violate 501(q)'s prohibition on making loans to debtors and on negotiating the making of loans on behalf of debtors. These services are permissible "debt management plan services."
- Distinguishes new loans from modifications of existing loans.



What the Limit on Revenues from Creditors Means for Housing Counseling Agencies

The IRS' conclusion that certain housing counseling negotiation services constitute "debt management plan services" means that an agency's total revenues from creditors (attributable to "debt management plan services") cannot exceed 50 percent of total revenues. In other words, if an agency's revenues from mortgage lenders, servicers and the like exceed 50 percent of all revenue, 501(c)(3) status will be forfeited.



Refinancing-Related Counseling

 Does assisting a homeowner with a refinancing trigger the loan negotiation prohibition of 501(q), as refinancing involve the making of a new loan? Chief Counsel Advice Memorandum author says it is not the IRS' intention to treat refinancingrelated counseling differently than modificationrelated counseling, although "the statute is not a model of clarity."



What about Agencies that Offer Mortgage Loans?

501(q) makes clear that covered housing counseling agencies cannot make loans to consumers. As such, covered agencies that offer loans may need to organize a separate affiliate for such activities. Note that the legislative history of 501(q) (*i.e.*, a report prepared by the Joint Committee on Taxation) states that "organizations that provide assistance to consumers to obtain a loan from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, for example, are not necessarily negotiating a loan for a consumer."



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What about Other Types of Housing Counseling?

While it does address foreclosure prevention counseling, the IRS Chief Counsel Advice Memorandum does not address other forms of HUD-approved housing counseling services, such as pre-purchase or reverse mortgage counseling. Both would seem to trigger the definition of "credit counseling services," but revenues from creditors in connection with such counseling (if any) may not be subject to the 50percent limitation.



Private Benefit to Creditors

The IRS Chief Counsel Advice Memorandum recognizes two earlier CCA Memoranda regarding credit counseling agencies, and states that 501(q) "does not diminish the requirements" set forth [in the two memos] but builds on and is consistent with such requirements." The Memorandum's author noted the ban on impermissible private benefit to creditors as an example. Housing counseling agencies must remain mindful of this consideration.

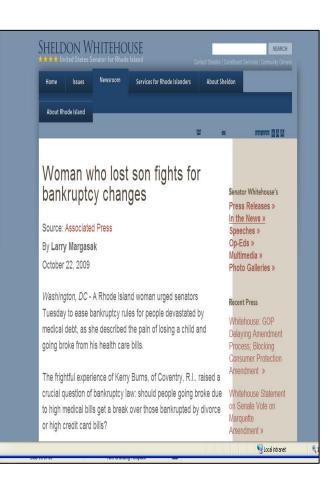




Bankruptcy Counseling



Medical Bankruptcy Fairness Act of 2009 (S. 1624)



- In August of 2009, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) introduced the "Medical Bankruptcy Fairness Act of 2009" (S. 1624) which, if enacted, would, in pertinent part, eliminate the pre-filing counseling requirement for medical debtors.
- Despite having been on the Senate Judiciary Committee's weekly mark-up agenda for a number of months, the bill recently was pulled off the agenda due to the inability of the bill to overcome strong opposition to a number of the bill's key provisions, including the provision that would eliminate the prefiling counseling requirement.
- Similar legislation, H.R.901, the "Medical Bankruptcy Fairness Act," was introduced in February 2009 by Rep. Shea-Porter (D-NH).
- Notably, H.R. 901 does <u>not</u> include any provision regarding pre-filing counseling, and the bill has not received any consideration in the House Judiciary Committee, to which it was referred.



Housing Counseling



Secure and Fair Enforcement of Mortgage Licensing Act of 2008

- In order to comply with the federal SAFE Act mortgage loan origination statutes have been amended to, at a minimum, require the registration/licensing of an individual who takes a residential mortgage loan application, or offers or negotiates terms of a residential mortgage loan, for compensation or gain. There is no automatic exemption for nonprofit housing counselors. As a result, state laws may be interpreted to require potential mandatory registration of nonprofit housing counselors.
- The SAFE Act gave states one year from July 30, 2008 (now extended to July 31, 2010 for most states) to pass legislation requiring the licensure of mortgage loan originators according to national minimum standards. Requirements in these statutes include, among many: criminal history and credit background checks; prelicensure education; pre-licensure testing; continuing education; net worth, and surety bond or recovery funds.

- HUD is tasked with reviewing state laws enacted in response to the SAFE Act and if it determines that a state's mortgage licensing standards do not meet the minimum requirements of the Act, HUD is charged to establish and implement a system for mortgage loan originators in that state.
- HUD has proposed rules to set forth the minimum standards that the SAFE Act requires states to meet when licensing loan originators and has indicated that the SAFE Act and the proposed rules do not provide any exemption for certain nonprofit organizations. As a result, both HUD and the states may provide for the potential mandatory licensing of nonprofit housing counselors



Additional Housing Counseling Developments

- Mortgage Foreclosure Consultant Protection Acts
 - Enforcement and Lawsuits
- State Reverse Mortgage Legislation
 - Minnesota, Massachusetts...
- Federal, State, and Private Plaintiff Enforcement
- Debt Adjusting Law and Related Considerations
- HUD Developments





State Debt Adjusting Laws and Related Developments



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State Debt Adjusting Law Trends

	December 2005	February 2007	July 2008	May 2010
States w/o Debt Adjusting Laws	3	3	2	2
States with Debt Adjusting Prohibitions w/limited or no Exceptions	2	2	1	1
States that Allow For-Profit and Non-Profit Entities to Engage in Debt Adjusting Activities	28	30	36	39
States with Licensing/Registration Requirements	29	31	34	37 (including effective dates of 2010)
States that Require Nonprofit Corporate Status (including (c)(3) status)	18	16	12	9
States that require 501(c)(3) Status	9	7	2	1

* For purposes of this chart, the term debt adjusting generally is defined to mean the entering into or making of a contract with a particular debtor where the debtor agrees to pay a certain amount of money periodically to the organization, and the organization, for consideration, agree to distribute, or distribute the same among specified creditors pursuant to an agreement or plan. It is further defined to mean the business or practice of any organization that holds itself out as acting or offering or attempting to act, for consideration as an intermediary between the debtor and his or her creditors for the purpose of settling, compounding or in anyway altering the terms of payment of any debt.



State Debt Adjusting Law and Related Developments

- Tennessee (UDMSA)
- Nevada (UDMSA)
- Indiana SB 328
- Kentucky HB 166

- Kansas HB 2668
- Delaware HB 232 (UDMSA Amendment)
- Mississippi SB 2427

States to watch: Illinois, Maryland, New York, California and others.

Types of statutes that are relevant grows: credit repair, reverse mortgage, mortgage consultants and more.



Investigations, Law Enforcement Actions and Private Lawsuits (and Class Actions)

- FTC Act and Related Statutes (e.g., CROA)
- State Consumer Protection Laws
- State Credit Services Organization Acts
- State Debt Adjusting Laws
- State Mortgage Foreclosure Consultant Laws
- Other State Marketing and Security Breach Laws (e.g., email)
- Contract Actions (Arbitration Provisions)
- Private Lawsuits May Include CROA and RICO claims, among other federal statutes.



Private Lawsuits and Class Actions

Where do they come from?

- Federal Credit Repair Organization Act
- State Credit Services Organization Acts
- State Debt Adjusting Laws (e.g., GA, SC, UDMSA states, and others).
- State Mortgage Foreclosure Consultant Laws
- Other State Marketing and Security Breach Laws (e.g., email)
- Contract Actions (Arbitration Provisions)
- Tort Law (Creditor Lawsuits)
- Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) (treble damages)



QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

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