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# Myths & Realities of Identity Change For Domestic Violence Advocates Working with Child Protection and Juvenile Court Systems

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*National Network to End Domestic Violence*

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This project was supported by Grant No.2007-TA-AX-K030 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

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### Myth #1

*Myth: You become an entirely new person.*

*Reality: You're the same person with just a new name or new SSN.*

You're still the same you, with the same financial and legal obligations you had before you changed your identity. In fact, after changing your identity, your life might become more difficult.

When the federal government makes a social security number change, they have to share that with quite a few other federal and state agencies, including the IRS, child support agencies, state tax agencies, student loan companies, and entitlement programs (e.g., welfare). Law enforcement may have access to your name change; so may other institutions such as collection agencies, credit bureaus, banks, and other financial institutions.

### Myth #2

*Myth: You get a whole new set of documentation.*

*Reality: Any new documents are likely to somehow be attached to your old identity.*

State laws vary slightly, but name change for safety doesn't entitle you to a brand new birth certificate. Your birth certificate may be amended, but the certificate will indicate that an amendment has been made. Some states will simply cross out your old name and add your new name.

In addition, the DMV requires source documents to get new ID, such as Social Security Number (SSN) for verification, birth certificate (which may not match your new name), name history, surrender of a former ID, etc. The old and new name is cross-checked in a database, and this information can be revealed in a background check.

### Myth #3

*Myth: You can start over with a clean slate.*

*Reality: If you change your social security number, you will lose your credit history, professional accomplishments and certifications, education credentials, and degrees.*

Everything that is tied to your social security number or name may not be transferred to your new social security number and name. For example, your credit report, bank accounts, educational degrees, job history, and rental history are all tied to your old SSN and name. Since you don't have a credit history, it will be difficult to get a credit card or loan. Potential employers, landlords, banks, and others will likely be suspicious of a perfectly clean history.

## **Myth #4**

*Myth: Your name change is completely confidential.*

*Reality: Most states require some form of official public notice.*

Some states require notices in the newspaper while other states post the notice on the courthouse door. Remember that many newspapers now publish to the Internet. If the abuser knows what area the victim lives in, the abuser may be able to find this petition by accessing the online version of the local newspaper.

## **Myth #5**

*Myth: Changing your name and SSN will guarantee that you won't be found.*

*Reality: Oftentimes, people are often tracked through friends and family, not their social security number.*

Even if you do take steps to change your identity, a stalker may still be able to track you down through family and friends who know your new identity and location. If you have ongoing legal issues with the abuser or don't plan to relocate, the risk that your new identity will be discovered is extremely high. In addition, if the abuser is using electronic surveillance or other types of technology to track your activities, a name or SSN change may readily be discovered.

## **Myth #6**

*Myth: You can get your kids away from the abuser by fleeing and changing your names.*

*Reality: Changing a child's name is very difficult, especially if the abuser is the child's parent.*

Changing the names and SSNs of children may also be prohibitive. Even if the court does allow the name to be changed, the consent (or at least the notification) of both parents is often required. Furthermore, notification of a child's name change is subject to the same requirements as an adult, and it may be published or posted. Before taking any steps involving children in which the abuser has joint custody, it's crucial to consult an attorney.

## **Myth #7**

*Myth: There's nothing I can do to protect myself and my children other than changing my SSN and name.*

*Reality: There are a variety of strategies you can use. Everyone's situation is complex and unique.*

Some other ways of protecting your identity include the following:

- Google yourself from a safe computer (at a public library or friend's house) to find out what information about you is already in the public domain.
- Check with a local domestic violence service provider to see if your state has an address confidentiality program.
- Block online and automated telephone access to your SSN (<https://www.socialsecurity.gov/blockaccess>).
- Contact the three major credit bureaus to place a security freeze on your credit (<http://www.experian.com>, <http://www.transunion.com>, [http://www.equifax.com/home/en\\_us](http://www.equifax.com/home/en_us)).
- Contact banks, utilities, department store credit cards, phone companies, etc., to place a new or extra password on your account. (Be sure not to use your mother's maiden name or the last four digits of your Social Security number or information the abuser can easily guess.)

For more information about safety, relocation, and identity change, contact NNEDV or GBLS.