

The Rosenthal Fair Debt Collection Practices Act

California Civil Code §§ 1788 et seq.

§ 1788. This title may be cited as the Rosenthal Fair Debt Collection Practices Act.

§ 1788.1

(a) The Legislature makes the following findings:

(1) The banking and credit system and grantors of credit to consumers are dependent upon the collection of just and owing debts. Unfair or deceptive collection practices undermine the public confidence which is essential to the continued functioning of the banking and credit system and sound extensions of credit to consumers.

(2) There is need to ensure that debt collectors and debtors exercise their responsibilities to one another with fairness, honesty and due regard for the rights of the other. (b) It is the purpose of this title to prohibit debt collectors from engaging in unfair or deceptive acts or practices in the collection of consumer debts and to require debtors to act fairly in entering into and honoring such debts, as specified in this title.

§ 1788.2

(a) Definitions and rules of construction set forth in this section are applicable for the purpose of this title.

(b) The term "debt collection" means any act or practice in connection with the collection of consumer debts.

(c) The term "debt collector" means any person who, in the ordinary course of business, regularly, on behalf of himself or herself or others, engages in debt collection. The term includes any person who composes and sells, or offers to compose and sell, forms, letters, and other collection media used or intended to be used for debt collection, but does not include an attorney or counselor at law.

(d) The term "debt" means money, property or their equivalent which is due or owing or alleged to be due or owing from a natural person to another person.

(e) The term "consumer credit transaction" means a transaction between a natural person and another person in which property, services or money is acquired on credit by that natural person from such other person primarily for personal, family, or household purposes.

(f) The terms "consumer debt" and "consumer credit" mean money, property or their equivalent, due or owing or alleged to be due or owing from a natural person by reason of a consumer credit transaction.

(g) The term "person" means a natural person, partnership, corporation, limited liability company, trust, estate, cooperative, association or other similar entity.

(h) The term "debtor" means a natural person from whom a debt collector seeks to collect a consumer debt which is due and owing or alleged to be due and owing from such person.

(i) The term "creditor" means a person who extends consumer credit to a debtor.

(j) The term "consumer credit report" means any written, oral or other communication of any information by a consumer reporting agency bearing on a consumer's creditworthiness, credit standing, credit capacity, character, general reputation, personal characteristics or mode of living which is used or expected to be used or collected in whole or in part for the purpose of serving as a factor in establishing the consumer's eligibility for (1) credit or insurance to be used primarily for person, family, or household purposes, or (2) employment purposes, or (3) other purposes authorized under any applicable federal or state law or regulation. The term does not include

(a) any report containing information solely as to transactions or experiences between the consumer and the person making the report;

(b) any authorization or approval of a specific extension of credit directly or indirectly by the issuer of a credit card or similar device; or

(c) any report in which a person who has been requested by a third party to make a specific extension of credit directly or indirectly to a consumer conveys his or her decision with respect to that request, if the third party advises the consumer of the name and address of the person to whom the request was made and such person makes the disclosures to the consumer required under any applicable federal or state law or regulation.

(k) The term "consumer reporting agency" means any person which, for monetary fees, dues, or on a cooperative nonprofit basis, regularly engages, in whole or in part, in the practice of assembling or evaluating consumer credit information or other information on consumers for the purpose of furnishing consumer credit reports to third parties, and which uses any means or facility for the purpose of preparing or furnishing consumer credit reports.

§ 1788.3. Nothing contained in this title shall be construed to prohibit a credit union chartered under Division 5 (commencing with Section 14000) of the Financial Code or under the Federal Credit Union Act (Chapter 14 (commencing with Section 1751) of Title 12 of the United States Code) from providing information to an employer when the employer is ordinarily and necessarily entitled to receive such information because he is an employee, officer, committee member, or agent of such credit union.

§ 1788.10. No debt collector shall collect or attempt to collect a consumer debt by means of the following conduct:

(a) The use, or threat of use, of physical force or violence or any criminal means to cause harm to the person, or the reputation, or the property of any person;

(b) The threat that the failure to pay a consumer debt will result in an accusation that the debtor has committed a crime where such accusation, if made, would be false;

(c) The communication of, or threat to communicate to any person the fact that a debtor has engaged in conduct, other than the failure to pay a consumer debt, which the debt collector knows or has reason to believe will defame the debtor;

(d) The threat to the debtor to sell or assign to another person the obligation of the debtor to pay a consumer debt, with an accompanying false representation that the result of such sale or assignment would be that the debtor would lose any defense to the consumer debt;

(e) The threat to any person that nonpayment of the consumer debt may result in the arrest of the debtor or the seizure, garnishment, attachment or sale of any property or the garnishment or attachment of wages of the debtor, unless such action is in fact contemplated by the debt collector and permitted by the law; or

(f) The threat to take any action against the debtor which is prohibited by this title.

§ 1788.11. No debt collector shall collect or attempt to collect a consumer debt by means of the following practices:

(a) Using obscene or profane language;

(b) Placing telephone calls without disclosure of the caller's identity, provided that an employee of a licensed collection agency may identify himself by using his registered alias name as long as he correctly identifies the agency he represents;

(c) Causing expense to any person for long distance telephone calls, telegram fees or charges for other similar communications, by misrepresenting to such person the purpose of such telephone call, telegram or similar communication;

(d) Causing a telephone to ring repeatedly or continuously to annoy the person called; or

(e) Communicating, by telephone or in person, with the debtor with such frequency as to be unreasonable and to constitute an harassment to the debtor under the circumstances.

§ 1788.12. No debt collector shall collect or attempt to collect a consumer debt by means of the following practices:

(a) Communicating with the debtor's employer regarding the debtor's consumer debt unless such a communication is necessary to the collection of the debt, or unless the debtor or his attorney has consented in writing to such communication. A communication is necessary to the collection of the debt only if it is made for the purposes of verifying the debtor's employment, locating the debtor, or effecting garnishment, after judgment, of the debtor's wages, or in the case of a medical debt for the purpose of discovering the existence of medical insurance. Any such communication, other than a communication in the case of a medical debt by a health care provider or its agent for the purpose of discovering the existence of medical insurance, shall be in writing unless such written communication receives no response within 15 days and shall be made only as many times as is necessary to the collection of the debt. Communications to a debtor's employer regarding a debt shall not contain language that would be improper if the communication were made to the debtor. One communication solely for the purpose of verifying the debtor's employment may be oral without prior written contact.

(b) Communicating information regarding a consumer debt to any member of the debtor's family, other than the debtor's spouse or the parents or guardians of the debtor who is either a minor or who resides in the same household with such parent or guardian, prior to obtaining a judgment against the debtor, except where the purpose of the communication is to locate the debtor, or where the debtor or his attorney has consented in writing to such communication;

(c) Communicating to any person any list of debtors which discloses the nature or existence of a consumer debt, commonly known as "deadbeat lists", or advertising any consumer debt for sale, by naming the debtor; or

(d) Communicating with the debtor by means of a written communication that displays or conveys any information about the consumer debt or the debtor other than the name, address and telephone number of the debtor and the debt collector and which is intended both to be seen by any other person and also to embarrass the debtor.

(e) Notwithstanding the foregoing provisions of this section, the disclosure, publication or communication by a debt collector of information relating to a consumer debt or the debtor to a consumer reporting agency or to any other person reasonably believed to have a legitimate business need for such information shall not be deemed to violate this title.

§ 1788.13. No debt collector shall collect or attempt to collect a consumer debt by means of the following practices:

(a) Any communication with the debtor other than in the name either of the debt collector or the person on whose behalf the debt collector is acting;

(b) Any false representation that any person is an attorney or counselor at law;

(c) Any communication with a debtor in the name of an attorney or counselor at law or upon stationery or like written instruments bearing the name of the attorney or counselor at law, unless such communication is by an attorney or counselor at law or shall have been approved or authorized by such attorney or counselor at law;

(d) The representation that any debt collector is vouched for, bonded by, affiliated with, or is an instrumentality, agent or official of any federal, state or local government or any agency of federal, state or local government, unless the collector is actually employed by the particular governmental agency in question and is acting on behalf of such agency in the debt collection matter;

(e) The false representation that the consumer debt may be increased by the addition of attorney's fees, investigation fees, service fees, finance charges, or other charges if, in fact, such fees or charges may not legally be added to the existing obligation;

(f) The false representation that information concerning a debtor's failure or alleged failure to pay a consumer debt has been or is about to be referred to a consumer reporting agency;

(g) The false representation that a debt collector is a consumer reporting agency;

(h) The false representation that collection letters, notices or other printed forms are being sent by or on behalf of a claim, credit, audit or legal department;

(i) The false representation of the true nature of the business or services being rendered by the debt collector;

(j) The false representation that a legal proceeding has been, is about to be, or will be instituted unless payment of a consumer debt is made;

(k) The false representation that a consumer debt has been, is about to be, or will be sold, assigned, or referred to a debt collector for collection; or

(l) Any communication by a licensed collection agency to a debtor demanding money unless the claim is actually assigned to the collection agency.

§ 1788.14. No debt collector shall collect or attempt to collect a consumer debt by means of the following practices:

(a) Obtaining an affirmation from a debtor who has been adjudicated a bankrupt, of a consumer debt which has been discharged in such bankruptcy, without clearly and conspicuously disclosing to the debtor, in writing, at the time such affirmation is sought, the fact that the debtor is not legally obligated to make such affirmation;

(b) Collecting or attempting to collect from the debtor the whole or any part of the debt collector's fee or charge for services rendered, or other expense incurred by the debt collector in the collection of the consumer debt, except as permitted by law; or

(c) Initiating communications, other than statements of account, with the debtor with regard to the consumer debt, when the debt collector has been previously notified in writing by the debtor's attorney that the debtor is represented by such attorney with respect to the consumer debt and such notice includes the attorney's name and address and a request by such attorney that all communications regarding the consumer debt be addressed to such attorney, unless the attorney fails to answer correspondence, return telephone calls, or discuss the obligation in question. This subdivision shall not apply where prior approval has been obtained from the debtor's attorney, or where the communication is a response in the ordinary course of business to a debtor's inquiry.

§ 1788.15

(a) No debt collector shall collect or attempt to collect a consumer debt by means of judicial proceedings when the debt collector knows that service of process, where essential to jurisdiction over the debtor or his property, has not been legally effected.

(b) No debt collector shall collect or attempt to collect a consumer debt, other than one reduced to judgment, by means of judicial proceedings in a county other than the county in which the debtor has incurred the consumer debt or the county in which the debtor resides at the time such proceedings are instituted, or resided at the time the debt was incurred.

§ 1788.16. It is unlawful, with respect to attempted collection of a consumer debt, for a debt collector, creditor, or an attorney, to send a communication which simulates legal or judicial process or which gives the appearance of being authorized, issued, or approved by a governmental agency or attorney when it is not. Any violation of the provisions of this section is a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment in the county jail not exceeding six months, or by a fine not exceeding two thousand five hundred dollars (\$2,500) or by both.

§ 1788.17. Notwithstanding any other provision of this title, every debt collector collecting or attempting to collect a consumer debt shall comply with the provisions of Sections 1692b to 1692j, inclusive, of, and shall be subject to the remedies in Section 1692k of, Title 15 of the United States Code. However, subsection (11) of Section 1692e and Section 1692g shall not apply to any person specified in paragraphs (A) and (B) of subsection (6) of Section 1692a of Title 15 of the United States Code or that person's principal. The references to federal codes in this section refer to those codes as they read January 1, 2001.

§ 1788.20. In connection with any request or application for consumer credit, no person shall:

(a) Request or apply for such credit at a time when such person knows there is no reasonable probability of such person's being able, or such person then lacks the intention, to pay the obligation created thereby in accordance with the terms and conditions of the credit extension; or

(b) Knowingly submit false or inaccurate information or willfully conceal adverse information bearing upon such person's credit worthiness, credit standing, or credit capacity.

§ 1788.21

(a) In connection with any consumer credit existing or requested to be extended to a person, such person shall within a reasonable time notify the creditor or prospective creditor of any change in such person's name, address, or employment.

(b) Each responsibility set forth in subdivision (a) shall apply only if and after the creditor clearly and conspicuously in writing discloses such responsibility to such person.

§ 1788.22

(a) In connection with any consumer credit extended to a person under an account:

(1) No such person shall attempt to consummate any consumer credit transaction thereunder knowing that credit privileges under the account have been terminated or suspended.

(2) Each such person shall notify the creditor by telephone, telegraph, letter, or any other reasonable means that an unauthorized use of the account has occurred or may occur as the result of loss or theft of a credit card, or other instrument identifying the account, within a reasonable time after such person's discovery thereof, and shall reasonably assist the creditor in determining the facts and circumstances relating to any unauthorized use of the account.

(b) Each responsibility set forth in subdivision (a) shall apply only if and after the creditor clearly and conspicuously in writing discloses such responsibility to such person.

§ 1788.30

(a) Any debt collector who violates this title with respect to any debtor shall be liable to that debtor only in an individual action, and his liability therein to that debtor shall be in an amount equal to the sum of any actual damages sustained by the debtor as a result of the violation.

(b) Any debt collector who willfully and knowingly violates this title with respect to any debtor shall, in addition to actual damages sustained by the debtor as a result of the violation, also be liable to the debtor only in an individual action, and his additional liability therein to that debtor shall be for a penalty in such amount as the court may allow, which shall not be less than one hundred dollars (\$100) nor greater than one thousand dollars (\$1,000).

(c) In the case of any action to enforce any liability under this title, the prevailing party shall be entitled to costs of the action. Reasonable attorney's fees, which shall be based on time necessarily expended to enforce the liability, shall be awarded to a prevailing debtor; reasonable attorney's fees may be awarded to a prevailing creditor upon a finding by the court that the debtor's prosecution or defense of the action was not in good faith.

(d) A debt collector shall have no civil liability under this title if, within 15 days either after discovering a violation which is able to be cured, or after the receipt of a written notice of such violation, the debt collector notifies the debtor of the violation, and makes whatever adjustments or corrections are necessary to cure the violation with respect to the debtor.

(e) A debt collector shall have no civil liability to which such debt collector might otherwise be subject for a violation of this title, if the debt collector shows by a preponderance of evidence that

the violation was not intentional and resulted notwithstanding the maintenance of procedures reasonably adapted to avoid any such violation.

(f) Any action under this section may be brought in any appropriate court of competent jurisdiction in an individual capacity only, within one year from the date of the occurrence of the violation.

(g) Any intentional violation of the provisions of this title by the debtor may be raised as a defense by the debt collector, if such violation is pertinent or relevant to any claim or action brought against the debt collector by or on behalf of the debtor.

§ 1788.31. If any provision of this title, or the application thereof to any person or circumstances, is held invalid, the remaining provisions of this title, or the application of such provisions to other persons or circumstances, shall not be affected thereby.

§ 1788.32. The remedies provided herein are intended to be cumulative and are in addition to any other procedures, rights, or remedies under any other provision of law. The enactment of this title shall not supersede existing administrative regulations of the Director of Consumer Affairs except to the extent that those regulations are inconsistent with the provisions of this title.

§ 1788.33. Any waiver of the provisions of this title is contrary to public policy, and is void and unenforceable.