

Finance and Insurance

Don't share Social Security number



On The Money

By JOHN OTTE

LETTING an unsavory character get your Social Security number is an open invitation for identity theft. To thwart crooks, many states removed Social Security numbers from drivers' licenses years ago.

However, some government agencies continue to request Social Security numbers on other applications. Still, one person can make a difference in helping government agencies protect all citizens from identity theft.

How a difference was made

A while back, I accompanied an acquaintance to a boating safety class conducted by the Des Moines Sail & Power Squadron.

The instructor passed around an Iowa Department of Natural Resources Recreational Safety Education Program Student Roster form, which I presumed he did at DNR's request.

The second item requested after "name" was "Social Security number." The hair on the back of my neck rose.

I drafted a letter to the DNR director. Two key paragraphs read:

"In this age of widespread identity

Key Points

- Exposing your Social Security number to prying public eyes poses a security risk.
- Government agencies will respond to concerns if citizens express them.
- Most states removed Social Security numbers from drivers' licenses years ago.

theft, few people should willingly put their Social Security number on a sheet to be passed around among 30 complete strangers.

"I would suggest that the Iowa DNR revise the student roster form to use some other type of identification. Tom Miller, Iowa attorney general, is working hard to teach Iowans to safeguard private information, particularly Social Security numbers and credit card numbers. Perhaps his office could offer suggestions for redesigning the DNR form."

In about two weeks, I got a response from Ken Herring, DNR division administrator. It read:

"Thank you for your letter and expressing your concerns about the data requested on the student class roster. The process of collecting Social Security numbers was added to the student class roster when our Electronic Licensing System for Iowa was instituted. This system was set up to allow student information to be added to ELSI to provide duplicate certificates or

build a customer record.

"We understand the concern of fraudulent uses of Social Security numbers and have begun steps to institute a more secure method of collecting data. Our safety-programs supervisor has applied for and just secured a grant to establish a new, secured online registration system, which would allow individuals to submit personal information in a more protected manner. The form used at the class you attended is being retired, and guidelines of the state's technology security will be adhered to in the new system.

"Until the system is up and running, we are advising our program instructors that students can

enter their three initials after their date of birth if they choose not to provide their Social Security number.

"Again, thank you for your letter and voicing your concerns. Our department is moving forward and using today's technology to work toward a secure registration system."



Farmers make progress with security

I assist the executive secretary of a thinly capitalized, not-for-profit agricultural education and recognition foundation.

About 33% of the foundation members who attended the 2004 awards program had Social Security numbers

on their checks. Public officials have been urging people to take these numbers off their checks for several years. That effort has traction.

Only 5% of members at the 2007 recognition program had Social Security numbers on their checks.

With a will, there's a way

By BRIAN SEXTON

IF you're involved in farming, you know the importance of keeping good records. What if your spouse is the record-keeper and you aren't, and he or she dies tomorrow? Do you at least know where the most important papers are?

Roger McEowen, professor of agricultural law at Iowa State University, says it's never too early to start preparing for that day. "No matter what age you are, take the time now to collect and organize your important legal documents. Make a list of those documents and where they are kept," he advises.

Do you know what life insurance policies you and your spouse have? Where is a copy of your will and estate plan? What about Social Security and documents for military benefits if your spouse was in the service?

When a spouse dies, the survivor is hit with legal and financial issues at a time of grieving. "That's why it's important for both spouses to file and categorize their important information before death, to help make the decisions easier," says McEowen.

Over half of the people nationwide don't have a will. "I'd guess over half of all farmers don't either," he says. "There are some older folks who don't want anything to do with lawyers. They don't want a will or don't want a trust. They believe that their family knows how to deal with all of this, and they're not going to have any disagreements."

At the other end of the spectrum is the younger generation. Most college students and other young people tend not to think about the fact that they will die someday. They say, "I don't have an estate, so planning isn't important to me."

Key Points

- When a spouse dies, legal and financial matters must be dealt with.
- Financial and legal issues hit at a time when the emotional stress is high.
- It's important for both spouses to take time now to get organized and prepared.

A do-it-yourself will?

Some folks don't have a will but simply write on a piece of paper the items or personal property they would like to give to specific family members or friends.

McEowen says it's best to have a plan in place, one that is enforceable. "If someone wants to challenge your wishes, it's easier to contest a will someone wrote on a sheet of paper than it is to challenge a properly drafted will that follows all the statutory requirements," he notes.

McEowen recommends staying away from forms you find on the Internet. There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all estate plan or will. "Sit down with an estate planner and an attorney, tell them your financial situation and estate planning desires, and draw up a will," he advises. "They'll tell you what legal forms you need and how they should be worded for your situation."

Give some thought to choosing a lawyer. "A lot of folks select a financial counselor and an attorney based on word of mouth," he says. "Pay attention to what people have to say about them. If you don't know who to call to get a recommendation, call your state bar association and explain your situation. They'll recommend an attorney."

Sexton is an intern at Wallace's Farmer, a Farm Progress publication in Iowa.

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