

Protect your 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. In order to thwart crooks, many states removed Social Security numbers from driver's licenses years ago. However, some government agencies continue requesting 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 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 Department of Natural Resources 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 department's form."

In about two weeks, I got a response from Ken Herring, the Department of Natural Resources 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

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 driver's licenses years ago.

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."



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Citizens making security progress

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.

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

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