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Governor Doyle Launches Tough Crackdown on Identity Theft

Opens Privacy Protection Office to Combat Growing Problem that Costs Wisconsin Businesses and Consumers \$570 Annually

MADISON - Governor Jim Doyle today launched a broad crackdown on identity theft that will strengthen enforcement and toughen penalties against identity criminals, as well as prevent identity crimes and help victims through the new Office of Privacy Protection. Identity theft is a growing problem in Wisconsin that costs businesses and consumers \$570 million annually. Reports of identity crimes have increased by 20 percent over the last three years, and an additional 100,000 incidents go unreported each year.

"Identity theft is an emerging problem for families and businesses in Wisconsin," said Governor Doyle. "With a social security number and date of birth, a criminal can send a middle class family thousands of dollars into debt -- and they would not even know it. I'm launching a crackdown on identity theft that will toughen penalties against the perpetrators and educate the public on how to protect themselves."

Would-be identity thieves have obtained personal information of more than 53 million Americans since February last year. Many of these Americans have no idea that their personal information has been compromised and do not take appropriate steps to protect themselves. In the meantime, identity thieves, armed with stolen information, can steal thousands of dollars from unsuspecting targets.

Thieves can profit for years, while innocent people are robbed of their financial security without even knowing it. When an innocent individual tries to apply for a college loan or a home mortgage, they may discover that their credit history has been ruined and they owe thousands of dollars. Immediately they notify the credit card companies, credit reporting agencies and police, but soon see that there is not much help available to them and they are left to navigate the complicated maze of authorities on their own.

Office of Privacy Protection (OPP)

Today, Governor Doyle opened the Office of Privacy Protection (OPP), which will serve as a centralized hub to educate consumers and businesses on how to protect themselves against identity theft and provide comprehensive assistance to those who have been victimized. Victims are able to contact the office now by calling toll-free at **1-800-422-7128** or on the web at **privacy.wi.gov**.

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The OPP is a joint effort between the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection and the Department of Financial Institutions. In addition to assisting with complaints, the OPP will assist local, state and federal law enforcement agencies with investigating and prosecuting identity crimes. The new office will seek input from consumer advocates and representatives of financial institutions, credit card issuers, merchants, and reporting agencies. The Governor will receive regular reports from the OPP on the state of privacy protection in Wisconsin. Policy makers, organizations, and businesses will be able to consult with the office for recommendations on how to protect against information security breaches.

Legislative Initiative

The Governor also proposed a legislative initiative to crack down on identity crimes that will increase penalties for identity theft, provide additional security for business, and create greater protections for individual victims. Under the Governor's proposal, identity theft will be increased to a Class E felony, which carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison and a \$50,000 fine. Governor Doyle's initiative will make the penalty for identity crimes against businesses the same as for crimes committed against individuals.

Victims of identity crimes can be arrested and even charged before they can convince authorities that the identity thief was actually the perpetrator of the crime. Even after the victim is cleared of any wrongdoing, he or she still has a criminal record. The Governor's legislative initiative will enable victims to clear their name by obtaining a "Factual Declaration of Innocence," a legal document that states that the victim has no responsibility for the crime committed in his or her name. This document will be obtainable through the new Office of Privacy Protection and will be recorded in a statewide Identity Theft Registry -- administered by the OPP and accessible to law enforcement agencies, prospective employers, and others who access an individual's criminal record.

Recently Governor Doyle signed legislation that require businesses to notify consumers when personal information is obtained by an unauthorized person and permit consumers to place a security freeze on their credit reports -- an important tool in protecting against identity theft. Governor Doyle today proposed strengthening these laws by establishing appropriate penalties that will ensure that the laws are obeyed and victims are protected.

Anyone who has been the victim of an identity crime or wants more information how to protect themselves or their business should contact the Office of Privacy Protection at toll-free **1-800-422-7128** or on the web at **privacy.wi.gov**.