

Is your private data on display?

County records on Web pose a threat

By EVA DOU
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Ken Klamerus of New Boston had known the Internet held a trove of information, but he didn't expect to see his Social Security number pop up.

"I really felt violated," he said after discovering his Social Security number and other personal data on Wayne County's online records.

Last September, Michigan legislators passed a law preventing county clerks from accepting new records with identifying information such as Social Security numbers.

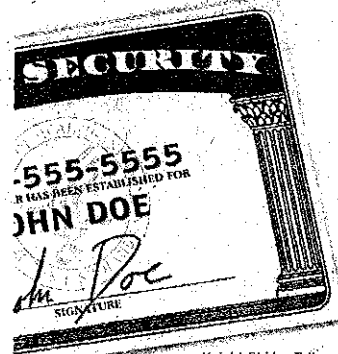
But the law does not affect records filed before last year.

Many residents of Wayne County and elsewhere are unaware, but some public records containing Social Security numbers, salaries, birth dates and other important identifier information have been on the Web since 2000, said Bernard Youngblood, Wayne County clerk.

The Free Press is not identifying the most vulnerable records to avoid providing a road map to potential identity thieves.

The number of Wayne County records containing Social Security numbers is estimated in the hundreds of thousands. "Years ago, it was common practice to include Social Security numbers," said Christine McLenon, chief deputy for the Wayne County clerk. "No one knew about identity theft."

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There is no law requiring counties to redact data on older records.

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Wayne County officials said they have not developed a comprehensive plan to redact vulnerable information from older records. They say, however, they are weighing the costs of a computer program, like that used in Macomb County, that scrubs Social Security numbers from online documents.

'A real urgency for security'

Identity theft is one of the fastest growing crimes in the United States, according to the Social Security Administration. The Federal Trade Commission estimates that each year as many as 9 million Americans become identity theft victims, to the tune of \$50 billion in losses.

Times have changed, and some agencies don't always keep up. Wayne and Oakland counties' online records still contain Social Security data.

Macomb County officials hired Affiliated Computer Services Inc., last year to electronically redact Social Security numbers online. The county paid about \$485,000 to check more than 4.8 million documents.

"I believe there is a real urgency for security," said Carmella Sabaugh, Macomb County clerk.

Ruth Johnson, Oakland County's clerk, said she had also considered electronic redaction for Oakland records, but that the numbers used to identify land parcels in Oakland are too similar to Social Security numbers for the system to be effective.

The county has taken other measures, she said.

Johnson said Oakland County records from March 2006 to the present have been redacted of Social Security numbers.

Previous numbers are removed on an individual basis when residents file an affidavit seeking redaction.

Clerks also try to catch Social Security numbers before they get in the system.

"We have a decades-old policy of notifying people if their Social Security number is in a document," said Jim VanLeuven, Oakland's deputy clerk.

Blindsided by technology

Wayne County has taken no

Protect yourself from identity theft

■ To check if you have vulnerable personal information online in Wayne County, go to www.waynecountylandrecords.com to check your records.

■ In Oakland County, residents are urged to inspect their legal and property records to check for personal information; they may then contact the Oakland County Clerk's Office, 248-858-0581 to redact it through an affidavit.

■ Avoid giving out personal information on the phone, through mail or over the Internet unless you know who you are dealing with.

■ Don't carry your Social Security card in your wallet. Only give it out if absolutely necessary. Try to use another identifier, if possible.

■ Shred documents with financial or personal information before discarding.

■ Regularly monitor your financial accounts for unexpected charges or statements.

■ Inspect your credit report. Be alert if you are denied credit for no apparent reason.

■ If you suspect your identity has been stolen, place a "fraud alert" on your credit reports by calling one of the nation's three consumer reporting companies: Equifax at 800-525-6285, Experian at 888-EXPERIAN (397-3742) or TransUnion at 800-680-7289.

■ Contact any credit card company or lending institution and close any accounts fraudulently established.

■ Report identity theft to your local police and to the Federal Trade Commission at www.ftc.gov/idtheft to aid law enforcement investigations.

Source: Federal Trade Commission

measures so far, but Youngblood said he has been talking to vendors to gauge the viability and cost of electronic redaction. He could not provide an estimate of the cost or the number of documents that would be affected.

Youngblood said the state law adopted last year also allows Wayne County residents to file an affidavit to have their Social Security numbers redacted from earlier documents.

Klamerus, the resident who saw his Social Security number

online, said he had not been able to get past answering machines at the Wayne County Clerk's Office.

But he said a friend who called received another version: It was impossible for the numbers to be online because they had already been redacted.

Wayne County resident Cheryl Huntley said she had no idea her private information was online, let alone that she had to file an affidavit to have it removed. Huntley found out her Social Security number was online when a Free Press reporter called.

"I know nothing about computers," said Huntley of Belleville. "How could I know that this stuff is on there?"

'Sold and sold again'

Last year, Michigan lawmakers considered requiring Social Security numbers to be redacted from all records, said Phil Browne, chief of staff for Rep. Brian Palmer, R-Romeo. But officials concluded that would be logistically difficult because of the volume of records and changes in filing practices. No such bills are being considered. That leaves the onus on individual counties.

Macomb and Oakland have taken some steps, but Wayne County's system still relies on individuals discovering their Social Security number online and filing an affidavit.

Unfortunately, even an affidavit does not guarantee security, Youngblood said.

For years, companies have been culling private information from public records and selling it.

"These documents probably have been sold to a variety of different title companies across the country, to be resold and sold and sold again," he said.

Youngblood said no criminal charges have been filed as a result of stolen Social Security numbers from Wayne County public records, but says weaknesses in the system.

And that's what has Klamerus concerned.

"This is private information," Klamerus said. "It should not be out in the public."

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