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Governor Doyle Column: Cracking Down on Identity Theft

Last year, 53 million Americans had their personal information stolen. What's worse is that many of these people have no idea that their date of birth, social security number, or credit card information may have been compromised, so they don't take the proper steps to protect themselves, their businesses, or their family's finances.

Identity thieves, armed with a credit card or bank account information, can steal thousands of dollars from an unsuspecting family. Thieves can profit for years, while innocent people are robbed of their financial security without even knowing it.

The tragedy comes when a hard-working family applies for a new home mortgage or a loan to send their son or daughter to college. They may discover that they owe thousands of dollars, their credit history is ruined, and their dream of buying a new home or sending their kid to college just got a whole lot more complicated.

Immediately they notify the credit card companies, credit reporting agencies, and police, but soon realize that there is not much help available to them and they're left to navigate this difficult maze of agencies mostly on their own.

But now help is available. I recently opened the Office of Privacy Protection, 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.

This is part of a tough crackdown I've launched on identity theft in Wisconsin – including a broad legislative initiative that will strengthen enforcement, toughen penalties, educate the public, and help people who have been victimized.

The public may contact the Office of Privacy Protection now by calling toll-free at **1-800-422-7128** or on the web at **privacy.wi.gov**.

The office will assist local, state and federal law enforcement agencies with investigating and prosecuting identity crimes. It will seek input from consumer advocates and representatives of financial institutions, credit card issuers and reporting agencies. Policy makers, organizations, and businesses from around the state will be able to consult with the office for recommendations on how to protect against information security breaches. And the office will regularly report to me on the state of privacy protection in Wisconsin.

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As part of my legislative initiative we will increase penalties, provide additional security for business, and create greater protections for victims.

Identity theft will now be considered a Class E felony, which carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison and a \$50,000 fine. Identity crimes against businesses will now carry the same punishment as crimes committed against individuals. And I have proposed better protections for victims of identity crimes, so that a victim can clear their name when a crime has been committed using their identity.

We are getting tough on identity crime in Wisconsin -- protecting middle class families and small business from a growing problem.

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