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Dept. of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection: It's on us – see yourself in cybersecurity

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A commentary by Lara Sutherlin, Administrator for the Division of Trade and Consumer Protection at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP)

MADISON, Wis. – As Cybersecurity Awareness Month comes to a close, we have another valuable opportunity to reevaluate our digital safety practices. Our lives continue to become more intertwined with the Internet every year, and we are increasingly reliant on computers, smartphones, and other devices that could only be dreamed of just a few decades ago. It can be easy to forget just how new and vulnerable these technologies still are. Devices and data are regularly targeted by cyberattacks like phishing, malware, hacking, and social engineering, which makes knowing the basics about these threats – and how to prevent them – extremely useful.

Cyberattacks can lead to data breaches, which are incidents wherein large quantities of private data are either exposed or stolen. In the 17 data breaches voluntarily reported to DATCP in 2021, more than 72 million people – over 750,000 Wisconsinites – had their private data compromised. Just one of those data breaches impacted over 50 million people and 400,000 Wisconsinites. Beyond the millions of dollars that data breaches can cost companies, these can be stressful for affected individuals. After a breach, extensive damage can be done to consumers' private information as it is exploited by cybercriminals.

To keep the public informed, DATCP has shared cybersecurity tips and expert recommendations throughout the month. Through our ongoing partnership with the

Wisconsin Department of Administration and Wisconsin Emergency Management, DATCP is providing four simple steps for consumers to take to protect themselves. As a consumers, I recommend that you: enable multi-factor login authentication on your digital accounts; create strong, unique passwords and consider using a password manager; recognize and report phishing attempts; and update your software regularly to optimize performance and minimize security risks.

If you're interested in learning more about data privacy, I recommend you read DATCP's Data Privacy and Security Advisory Committee Report. In 2020, our team convened the Data Privacy and Security Advisory Committee to determine the efficacy of existing consumer data privacy initiatives, consider how best to protect information belonging to individual, private, and public entities in Wisconsin, and identify possible changes to Wisconsin state law on cybersecurity. The report remains as a resource for Wisconsinites considering the existing status of data privacy and security and potential reforms for the future.

Even though Cybersecurity Awareness Month is coming to a close, I encourage you to stay vigilant about cybersecurity and protecting your data. Cybercriminals won't stop phishing and social engineering, and the onus is on each of us to protect ourselves. As DATCP looks forward to the future of consumer protection, our agency is available as a resource to consumers, businesses, stakeholders, and advocates to help better protect ourselves and others from cyber threats.