Laptop Theft Puts Fla. Residents' Data at Risk

By Alan Levin, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — A thief stole a government laptop with personal information on 133,000 Florida residents, the latest in a surge of thefts and hacker incursions that could lead to financial fraud.

The U.S. Transportation Department's Inspector General announced the theft Wednesday, two weeks after the laptop was stolen in Doral, Fla., and five days after investigators learned that its hard drive contained sensitive data. Letters are being sent to those who may be affected, acting Inspector General Todd Zinser said.

The agent assigned the computer initially thought he may have left it at a meeting and didn't report it as a theft right away, Zinser said. He said police found that a lock on the agent's car had been tampered with.

In a separate case, the Veterans Affairs Department said it has arranged with a company to detect credit misuse for millions of veterans whose personal data were on a laptop stolen in May. The FBI recovered the laptop and says it is very unlikely the data was accessed.

Unisys, a VA subcontractor, also agreed to provide credit monitoring for up to 38,000 veterans after the company last week lost a desktop computer.

The data on the computer stolen in Florida included information on 80,670 commercial driver's licenses in the Miami-Dade County area, 42,800 Florida residents with pilot's licenses and about 9,500 commercial or regular driver's licenses in the Tampa area. All of the records included Social Security numbers.

Privacy experts say that having such information could allow thieves to apply for credit cards under the names of people on the lists. Beth Givens, director of the non-profit Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, said losses of personal data are increasingly common. Her group has tracked dozens of thefts and data breaches since Feb. 15, 2005. The number involving laptops climbed from 22 last year to 43 so far in 2006.

Givens urges anyone involved in such a case to place a fraud alert on their credit. "It's better to be safe," she said.

The inspector general is considering fraud monitoring for people whose information was on the laptop, but Zinser said he doubted his office could afford it. Fraud monitoring services typically provide alerts to individuals of new activity in their credit files, but many companies charge a fee for the service.

The inspector general is doing an internal review of the case, has assigned 10 agents to assist the Miami-Dade police investigation, and is offering a $10,000 reward for laptop.

Since the theft, inspector general laptops have had sensitive personal data removed from them, Zinser said. The inspector general has set up a hotline to answer questions about the case: 800-424-9071.

Discovery of recent security breaches that exposed people to possible identity theft. *Among them:*

- July 26: U.S. Navy offices, Trenton and Jersey City, N.J. Two laptops stolen containing 4,000 social security numbers of Navy applicants and others.
- July 17: Vassar Brothers Medical Center, Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Laptop stolen containing over 250,000 records on patients, including Social Security numbers and dates of birth.
- July 14: Circuit Court Clerk's office, Hampton, Va. Software problem causes public computer containing over 100,000 records of taxpayers to display Social Security numbers.
- June 29: Nebraska Treasurer's Office, Lincoln, Neb. A hacker broke into a child-support database and may have obtained Social Security numbers and tax IDs for 9,000 businesses.
- June 21: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington. A hacker may have obtained names, Social Security numbers and photos of employees. About 26,000 records compromised.

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