

VA's Notification to Veterans

Dear Veteran:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has recently learned that an employee took home electronic data from VA, which he was not authorized to do and was in violation of established policies. The employee's home was burglarized and this data was stolen. The data contained identifying information including names, social security numbers, and dates of birth for up to 26.5 million veterans and some spouses, as well as some disability ratings. As a result of this incident, information identifiable with you was potentially exposed to others. It is important to note that the affected data did not include any of VA's electronic health records or any financial information.

Appropriate law enforcement agencies, including the FBI and the VA Inspector General's office, have launched full-scale investigations into this matter. Authorities believe it is unlikely the perpetrators targeted the items because of any knowledge of the data contents. It is possible that they remain unaware of the information which they possess or of how to make use of it.

Out of an abundance of caution, however, VA is taking all possible steps to protect and inform our veterans. While you do not need to take any action unless you are aware of suspicious activity regarding your personal information, there are many steps you may take to protect against possible identity theft and we wanted you to be aware of these. Specific information is included in the attached question and answer sheet. For additional information, VA has teamed up the Federal Trade Commission and has a website (www.firstgov.gov) with information on this matter or you may call 1-800-FED-INFO (1-800-333-4636). The call center will operate from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. (EDT), Monday-Saturday, as long as it is needed.

We apologize for any inconvenience or concern this situation may cause, but we at VA believe it is important for you to be fully informed of any potential risk resulting from this incident. Again, we want to reassure you we have no evidence that your protected data has been misused. We will keep you apprised of any further developments. The men and women of VA take our obligation to honor and serve America's veterans very seriously and we are committed to seeing this never happens again. Sincerely, R. James Nicholson Secretary of Veterans Affairs

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R. James Nicholson Secretary of Veterans Affairs

VA Takes Heat Over Theft of Veterans' Personal Data (MOAA News)

It's been all over the papers and TV this week, so you're likely already aware of the theft of a computer containing 26 million veterans' personal data (including Social Security numbers) from the home of a mid-level VA employee.

Our first reaction was, "What will the government do to protect the people whose data was stolen"? The second was, "What kind of security system could possibly allow any VA employee to take that kind and volume of data home"?

At scathing House and Senate hearings yesterday, legislators took VA Secretary Jim Nicholson to task for a VA data security system that has been criticized for years. They also expressed their unhappiness about the three-week delay between the time the data was stolen and notification to the public. They were clear that the VA's data security program has to be fixed, and fixed fast, and those responsible for the circumstances that allowed this disclosure need to be punished.

Secretary Nicholson expressed his own anger about the situation and vowed to take "decisive action" after a full investigation by the VA Inspector General George Opfer.

Opfer told the Washington Post that the employee in question had been taking the data home since 2003.

"We still hope this was a common theft and that no use of this data will be made," Nicholson said. In the meantime, the VA has placed a variety of notices on its Web site at <http://www1.va.gov/opa/> including a letter of apology from Secretary Nicholson, information about what actions veterans can take, and a list of answers to frequently asked questions. The VA also has a toll-free hot line at 1-800-FED-INFO (1-800-333-4636).

In the meantime, MOAA has endorsed the Veterans Identity Protection Act of 2006, introduced in the Senate as S. 2970 (Kerry, D-MA) and in the House as H.R. 5455 (Salazar, D-CO). This legislation would provide one year of free credit monitoring to veterans whose personal information was stolen in the recent theft, with one free credit report each year for the following two years. To urge your legislators to support these bills, visit <http://capwiz.com/moaa/issues/bills/> and scroll down to "Veterans and Other Issues" to click on S. 2970 and H.R. 5455.

In the interest of leaving no stone unturned, MOAA President VADM Norb Ryan, Jr. (USN-Ret) has directed a renewed review of MOAA's internal practices to ensure our membership data is protected from disclosure or intrusion. See VADM Ryan's message to MOAA members at <http://www.moaa.org/security>.