

Stop theft of your Social Security numbers

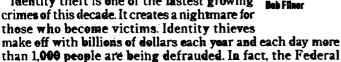
By Congressman Bob Filner

any of my constituents have alerted me to a serious attack on our personal privacy, and an insidious practice that has become known as identity theft. Amazingly enough, this theft is facilitated by a public agency, the Department of Health and Human Services, which aids and abets this theft not through the Internet or any high-technology means but through the U.S. Postal Service. By including our Social Security numbers on Medicare related mailings, the Department

of Health and Human Services are placing thousands of Medicare beneficiaries at risk of becoming victims of identity theft.

To stop this problem, this year I plan to introduce a bill that will prohibit the Department of Health and Human Services from including our Social Security numbers on Medicare related mailings the department mails us every year.

Identity theft is one of the fastest growing

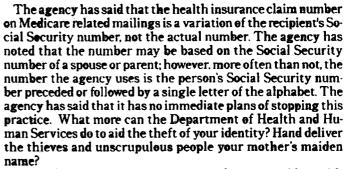


Trade Commission recently listed identity theft as the top consumer complaint.

With just your name and your Social Security number, a thief can open credit lines worth \$10,000, rent apartments, sign up for utilities, and even earn income. Your credit rating is ruined, you risk being rejected for everything from a college lean to a mortgage, and it is up to you to fix it all. Law enforcement will generally not pursue these identity theft cases.

Having your Social Security card number on a Medicare related mailing puts people at a higher risk for identity theft. Mail that is lost or stolen with personally identifiable information on them like a person's Social Security number can be used by criminals to steal someone's identity and commit fraud.

In light of this, making it even easier for identity theft by allowing public view of Social Security numbers on Medicare related mailings seems criminal. Yet that is precisely what the Department of Health and Human Services does.



Not too long ago we were experiencing the same problem with the mailing labels sent to us from the IRS. I was told that there was no way the IRS would change this practice. I found it incomprehensible that neither the agency nor its contractor would change a computer program for booklets that would be mailed out to millions of Americans all over our nation. After I introduced a bill to require the IRS to stop putting our Social Security numbers on its mailings, the department finally found a way to stop this bad practice.

Many commercial insurance companies have already taken steps to remove Social Security numbers from their mailings. Some states prohibit companies from displaying Social Security numbers internally an assign consumers unique numbers that would appear on Medicare cards. It's time the federal goverament does its part to stop identity theft and help protect an individual's personal privacy.

There is no excuse for leaving Medicare beneficiaries vulnerable to identity theft with a thinly disguised Social Securi-

ty number on a Medicare related mailings.

My bill will force the Department of Health and Human Services to make this change to protect one of the most precious keys to our personal information, our Social Security number. To do any less would expose millions of us to devastating personal and financial losses and the most important loss of all, our good name.

Congressman Bob Filner represents California's 51st Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives.