

Electronic data for 26.5 million veterans stolen

ARMY NEWS SERVICE

Special to The Monitor

WASHINGTON – Electronic data including names, social security numbers and dates of birth for up to 26.5 million veterans and some spouses, as well as disability ratings, have been stolen.

The electronic data was burglarized from the home of a Department of Veterans Affairs employee who violated organization policies by taking the data home.

The FBI, VA Inspector General's office and law-enforcement agencies have launched an investigation, and the employee is on administrative leave pending an outcome.

"Authorities believe it is unlikely the perpetrators targeted the items because of any knowledge of data contents," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs R. James Nicholson in a notification letter to veterans. "It is possible that they remain unaware of the information or how to make use of it."

"VA is taking all possible steps to protect and inform our veterans," said Nicholson, adding that no evidence suggests the data has been used.

VA is working with Congress, the

news media, veterans service organizations and other government agencies to ensure veterans and their families are aware of the situation and know how to protect themselves from misuse of their personal information.

Task Force members are working with credit bureaus to help ensure veterans receive free credit reports, and will meet today to coordinate Federal response and increase safeguards to prevent the reoccurrence of such incidents.

More information is available at . Veterans may also call (800)-FED-INFO to learn about consumer-identity protections. The call center will be open 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. EDT Monday through Saturday as long as it is needed.

"The call center will be able to handle up to 20,000 calls per hour, or 260,000 calls per day," Nicholson added.

"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," he said.

(Editor's note: Information provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs.)

VA urges caution after theft of personal information

SAMANTHA L. QUIGLEY

American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON – Veterans Affairs officials today announced the theft of personal information on up to 26.5 million veterans. However, VA Secretary R. James Nicholson stressed there's no indication the information is being used for purposes of fraud.

"We at the VA have recently learned that an employee here, a data analyst, took home a considerable amount of electronic data from the VA, which he was not authorized to do," Nicholson said. "His home was burglarized, and this data was stolen."

The compromised data includes names, Social Security numbers and birthdates of veterans separating from the military since 1975, he said. The information also may have included data on veterans who separated before 1975 but who submitted a claim for VA benefits.

No medical or financial information was compromised, though the files might have contained numeric disability ratings in some cases, Nicholson added. A statement issued by the department indicated that spousal information also might have been compromised in some cases.

"There is no indication & that any use is being made of this data or even that (the thieves) know they have it," Nicholson said.

Exercising what the secretary called "an abundance of caution," the department is working through a number of channels, including the news media, to make veterans aware of the situation. Individual notification letters also will be mailed to veterans.

The department is providing more

information through the www.firstgov.gov Web site and call centers that can be reached at (800) 333-4636. The call centers, which will be active today, will be able to handle more than 250,000 calls a day.

Nichols said the Federal Trade Commission has alerted credit bureaus of a potential increase in requests for fraud alerts and for requests for credit reports.

There is no indication when the career employee removed the information from his office, but the data was stolen when his home was burglarized sometime this month, Nicholson said. He declined to identify the employee or where he lives but said law enforcement officials reported several burglaries in the area and they do not believe the stolen information was targeted.

"The employee has been placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of (a full-scale) investigation," Nicholson said. All appropriate law enforcement agencies, including the FBI and the Veterans Affairs Department's Inspector General are participating in the investigation.

VA officials moved up the date by which all department employees must complete the "VA Cyber Security Awareness Training Course" and the "General Employee Privacy Awareness Course." Both must be completed by June 30.

Additionally, Veterans Affairs will immediately begin conducting a review of all current positions requiring access to sensitive information. All employees requiring access to such data will undergo updated law enforcement and background checks.

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