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Newport News Sheriff's Office is Committed to Fighting Identity Theft

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If Ben Bernanke, Chairman of the Federal Reserve, can fall victim to identity theft, anyone can. Not long ago, Bernanke's wife Anna was at a Capitol Hill coffeehouse when her purse was stolen. It contained personal checks, credit cards, and other personal information. Unusual bank transactions were reported soon after. It turns out that the Bernanke family was one of 500 separate instances traced to one crime ring.

Any compromise to homeland security depends on the sensitivity of stolen information. In the case of an individual, it is more likely that their personal finances would suffer as a result of identity theft. In the case of corporations, secrets could be stolen if proper precautions are not followed.

Take, for example, a CBS News report from April, 2010. The investigative piece highlighted the threat of identity theft from photocopiers. Information contained on hard drives included a list of targets in a major drug raid compiled by a police department narcotics unit. Also found were design plans for a building near Ground Zero in New York. This demonstrates how easy it would be for data to fall into the wrong hands.

The Newport News Sheriff's Office (NNSO) is committed to fighting identity theft. If consumers better understand the risks, they are better prepared to protect themselves. The NNSO

uses its speakers bureau to alert citizens to the newest scams and high-tech methods of fraud. However, old-fashioned thievery still goes on. The practice known as "dumpster diving" is when thieves rummage through trash looking for personal identifying information. They will use that information to assume your identity and begin to rob you blind.

Thieves can rent an apartment, obtain a credit card or establish utility accounts in the victim's name. The victim may not discover the theft until they are contacted by a debt collector.

NNSO Community Resource Officer Vickie Gaffney accepts invitations across the city to talk about identity theft and how not to fall prey. "I suggest they tell their family they want a shredder for Christmas," Gaffney said. Shredding paperwork is one way to safeguard personal information.

You could say Gaffney is giving the public Christmas gifts throughout the year by organizing Shred Day events across the city. The Shred Day event on August 20, 2009 was a huge success. For three hours, hundreds of people lined-up and took advantage of the free opportunity.

Stealth Shredding, Inc. donated their services. The Home Depot provided the convenient location and personnel to help with the set-up. A food drive was held to coincide with the shredding campaign and benefited the Food Bank of the Virginia Peninsula, a non-profit organization. Even the Mariners/Oyster Point Lions Club got in on the action by providing free eyesight exams, along with hearing tests and diabetes screenings from their mobile clinic.

Skeeter Barnes operated the shredding truck and kept track of how much paper was destroyed. He said, "The truck will hold 12,000 pounds. I loaded 37 containers which weigh about 250-300 pounds apiece." The belly of the truck was full by the end of the event. Over 11,000 pounds of once confidential documents were reduced to nothing more than confetti.



The public lined up to have their confidential documents shred.

The geography of Newport News, Virginia makes it a difficult city to traverse. It is long and narrow with only two major streets linking north to south. Often they are clogged with traffic. That is one reason why Sheriff Gabe Morgan wanted to diversify the Shred Day event locations. On April 24, 2010, a Shred Day was held for residents near the southern tip of the City. Sheriff Morgan said, "I know that transportation is an issue for people in the Southeast community. To expect people here in the south to travel the full length of the City to have their papers shredded is not realistic. I think it's a tremendous service to the community and we needed to make it more available for this area."

Sherry Thomas, a Williamsburg resident, was happy to learn about the event. She said, "I have had these two bags of mail for over a year now. So I just had to grab them and come on out. I have known third party about people who have had their identity stolen. They tell me once it happens, it's so hard to get their name cleared." Newport News resident Bill Garlette agreed, "I burn up shredders all the time because I try to keep my ID safe. Anything I get in the mail that's a solicitation with my name on it, it goes into the grinding pile." He went on to say he does his banking online so as not to worry about checks coming through the mail and getting stolen from his mailbox. "You can never be too careful. I check my bank accounts and credit card accounts online every day because I am concerned. I have never had a problem... knock on wood!"

Gaffney often talks to senior citizens about the modern convenience of direct deposit and its benefits. It stops criminals from stealing and forging their checks. "If the 15th is a Monday, you get the money on the previous Friday. You won't have someone reaching into your mailbox stealing your check." Some seniors are apprehensive about having their Social Security check and SSI payment go directly into their bank account. But with the reassurance of someone in law enforcement, they are more likely to take advantage of the program. The U.S. Department of the Treasury and the Federal Reserve sponsors



Skeeter Barnes operates the Stealth Shredding Truck.

the "Go Direct" program and it is supported by the National Sheriffs' Association.

The chair of the Federal Reserve and his wife were lucky after their personal information was swept up in an elaborate scheme. Arrests were made in the Bernanke case and ultimately they didn't lose any money as a result of the theft. ★



The event in Southeast Newport News operated like a drive-up services with volunteers hauling unwanted papers to be destroyed by the shredding truck.



Sherry Thomas (pictured center) drove from Williamsburg to take advantage of the free event organized by the Newport News Sheriff's Office.