



NEWS RELEASE

OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MISSOURI

TODD P. GRAVES

Contact Don Ledford, Public Affairs (816) 426-4220 400 East Ninth Street, Room 5510 Kansas City, MO 64106

www.usdoj.gov/usao/mow

AUGUST 1, 2003
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

(NOTE: Audio comments from U.S. Attorney Todd Graves are available in MP3 format, and may be downloaded from the district's Web site at www.usdoj.gov/usao/mow. Additional information about identity theft is also available on the district's Web site.)

IDENTITY THEFT: DON'T BE A VICTIM **PUBLIC INVITED TO FORUM**

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – Todd P. Graves, United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, announced today that the public is invited to attend a free forum on identity theft, which has been called the fastest-growing crime in America.

“Identity theft has quickly emerged as a significant criminal threat to consumers in the information age,” Graves said. “We are moving aggressively to prosecute those who steal personal information, like Social Security or credit card numbers, in order to profit from their victims. But the old adage about an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure certainly applies here. We want to equip the public to protect themselves so they won't be victimized.”

On Tuesday, Aug. 12, 2003, a public forum on identity theft will be held at the Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kan., co-sponsored by the U.S. Attorney's Offices for the Western District of Missouri and Kansas, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The forum is being held in conjunction with a two-day conference for law enforcement officers, victim advocates, and social service providers. Because identity theft is such a rapidly growing crime, Graves said, conference organizers recognized the need for a public forum as well.

“Anyone with a credit card, a checking account, or a Social Security number – and that's just about everyone – can benefit from attending this public forum,” Graves said. “Most victims of identity theft don't realize how vulnerable they are, until it's too late. We want to provide some information that will help people protect themselves from identity theft.”

A recent national survey found that identity theft was far more widespread than earlier

believed. A survey conducted by Gartner, Inc. – a research and consulting firm in Stamford, Conn. – indicates that about 7 million Americans were victims of identity theft last year. That’s a nearly 80 percent increase from the previous year, according to the study.

According to Graves, the Federal Trade Commission logged 161,819 complaints from victims of identity theft last year – twice as many complaints as in 2001. “Those complaints represent only a fraction of the actual cases reported to law enforcement,” Graves said. He added that the FTC is conducting its own survey to determine the scope of the problem, but those results are not yet available.

“Identity theft isn’t a new crime,” Graves said, “but all of the technology that makes life easier for consumers has also made life easier for identity thieves. This conference and public forum is just one of the ways we are aggressively responding to this growing trend.”

Graves also cited the Computer Crimes Unit he established last year, staffed by attorneys who focus on prosecuting computer-related crimes. Those attorneys work with investigators at the FBI’s recently opened Heartland Computer Forensics Laboratory. “The combination of focused prosecutors and the latest forensic technology improves our ability to address issues like identity theft,” Graves said.

“Anyone can become a victim of identity theft,” Graves warned. “In our district, a state legislator from Platte County was victimized when somebody stole his credit card number and used it to buy hunting equipment. A retired police officer was victimized when somebody applied for a new credit card under his name and began making purchases.”

In many cases, Graves explained, victims spend a lot of time and effort trying to clear their reputation and correct their credit history. For example, Graves recalled the case of a pastor who was victimized when someone purchased a house, a car, and obtained credit cards using his stolen identity. The damage to his credit report caused a lot of frustration when the pastor applied for a home loan application.

In another case, a Kansas City man was victimized when a relative stole his identity and was later charged with drunk driving. He didn’t know he was a victim of identity theft until he tried to renew his driver’s license and his application was denied. “He’s had to unravel a lot of red tape to clear his name,” Graves said.

At the upcoming public forum, a representative of Trans Union, one of the nation’s three major credit reporting bureaus, will offer tips for consumers to protect themselves from identity theft, as well as what steps to take to find out if they have become a victim of identity theft, and how to report the crime.

The identity theft forum, which is free to the public, will be from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. in Room 233 of the General Education Building at Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park, Kan., 66210.

This news release, as well as additional information about the office of the United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, is available on-line at

www.usdoj.gov/usao/mow