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Fire Aftermath Leads to Records Warning

DES MONES, Iowa – A fire in December and a waste-handling error two months later may have exposed confidential records in the Warren County office of the Iowa Department of Human Services.

The DHS on Friday notified about 3,000 Warren County residents that there is a slight chance their records may have been exposed. The agency offered to pay for a one-year enrollment in a credit monitoring service for anyone who feared that the breach could lead to a stolen identity.

Officials said it is unlikely that anyone misused information on the waterlogged or partly burned pages but Pat Penning, service area manager for the region including Warren County, said department officials are treating the case seriously.

“The chance that your information was improperly accessed is small but we realize that you may want to take steps to be sure that your information is not used by another person,” she said.

The unlikely chain of events began with a fire of undetermined origin that destroyed the Warren County-owned DHS office in Indianola early on the morning of Dec. 4, 2011.

Some documents were beyond repair and were moved to a secure facility owned by Warren County prior to being shredded.

Warren County officials acknowledge that in early February a county maintenance worker mistakenly moved a garbage-can type container full of damaged documents from the secure location back to the destroyed building.

The error was not discovered until March 14 when the department received a call from a neighbor of the burned building to say that DHS papers had blown to her yard. DHS officials confirmed the report that evening and spent the next day collecting as much of the debris as possible.

The recovered documents were individual pages within files, not complete files. DHS officials said they could not be certain that they found all of the mistakenly placed documents amidst the trash, so the warning letters were sent to all people with open or recently-closed Warren County cases. None of the misplaced documents contained bank or credit card information.

Residents were given instructions on what to do if they thought their identities had been compromised, and the agency will pay for a year’s enrollment in a credit monitoring program for anyone who requests it.

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