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**NEWS RELEASE**

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**A Thief in the Night**  
**by Senator Larry Craig**

By now, you have probably heard about the theft of a Veterans Administration (VA) computer containing vital information on more than 26 million veterans and their spouses. If you haven't, I can only describe the situation as ironic.

An employee of the VA downloaded information on millions of veterans onto a laptop computer and took it home, seeking to go above and beyond the call of duty and get some extra work done. Later, that employee's home was burglarized while he was at work, and the laptop was stolen. Opposite of the expected outcome, that employee's extra efforts ended up causing a lot of trouble.

The more I learn about this case, the more troubling it becomes. The files included the names, birthdays and Social Security numbers of each of these veterans and their families, putting each of these individuals at risk for identity theft. But even worse is the fact that it took the VA more than two weeks to seek the FBI's assistance in the matter, and nearly three weeks to notify the public that the theft had even taken place.

I read VA Secretary Jim Nicholson's statement recently in the press about his anger at having discovered this lapse in security nearly 13 days after it happened. I don't doubt that anger was sincere. But knowing that, Secretary Nicholson waited six more days to notify me, the public and millions of veterans what had happened. That is inexcusable.

In the midst of all the media hype and the emotion, I am doing my best to remain reasonable. After the Department of Defense, the VA is the largest federal agency, so the chief of that agency can't know every detail of what goes on. And I understand Mr. Nicholson's need to spend some time with staff assessing problems and reviewing options.

That being said, I find it increasingly frustrating that decisions were made without the knowledge or input of elected officials. We represent the people and they deserve a seat at the table a little earlier in the process. I made sure to communicate these frustrations to Secretary Nicholson at a recent joint hearing by the committee I chair, the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

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I'm not about to stop at voicing my concern, though. All federal agencies – not just the VA – need to review their data security procedures and revise them, if necessary, so this can never happen again. And I will not accept that just one person is at fault.

That one employee was trying to do good, and made a bad judgment call. However, safeguards should have been in place at the agency that notified others about such a large amount of sensitive data being downloaded and removed from the building. To his credit, when he realized the laptop was gone, he immediately told his superiors. But the people who decided to take 13 days before notifying the FBI have some explaining to do, and I intend to make them do it.

In the meantime, I encourage all veterans and their families to keep a close watch on your credit card statements, your bank accounts and credit reports for any unusual or unauthorized activity. If you believe you have been victimized by identity theft, notify your bank and credit card companies immediately.

VA has also announced that it will send out individual notification letters to every veteran possible. Veterans can also go to [www.firstgov.gov](http://www.firstgov.gov) or [www.va.gov/opa](http://www.va.gov/opa) to get more information. The VA's website is being set up to handle increased web traffic. The VA has also set up a manned call center with information about this situation and consumer identity protections. That toll free number is 1-800-FED INFO (333-4636). The call center operates from 8 am to 9 pm (EDT), Monday-Saturday as long as it is needed.

Also, it is very important for veterans and their families to know that the VA will not be calling or e-mailing anyone to verify any information. Scam artists may try to capitalize on the situation. If anyone calls or e-mails you posing as a representative of the VA, do not give them any personal information.

What has been done cannot be undone. I will do my best, however, to mitigate the damage, and see that changes are made, so this never happens again.