

Most state agencies cannot track suspected identity thieves

By Ryan Luby

UPDATED 6:11 PM CDT Jul 25, 2012

OMAHA, Neb. -

Two Nebraska lawmakers said federal government needs to give Americans more of an opportunity to verify their own identities.

Congressman Lee Terry, and state senator Charlie Janssen, responded to a KETV NewsWatch I-Team investigation that challenged why federal law restricts the use of social security numbers in state agencies.

Both said identity theft should be a major concern.

"Yeah, it's a huge problem," Janssen said.

He questioned why federal law prohibits federal and state agencies from verifying the identities of every American, using social security number data they already have.

"The federal government, quite frankly, has turned a blind eye to it because somebody's paying them money," Janssen said.

He said government agencies are careful to monitor tax dollars leaving government coffers, but no so careful to monitor tax dollars coming in -- no matter where they come from.

Yeni Pena, for instance, is accused of using a bogus social security number to secure a dishwashing job in West Omaha. The social security number she used matches the one that belongs to 9-year-old Makena Rung who lives in Lincoln.

Pena was arrested after the I-Team first reported the Rung family's story in June.

The family found out Makena's social security number was compromised when they applied for Medicaid through Nebraska's Department of Health and Human Services. The agency cross-checks every applicant's social security number online -- with the Social Security Number Verification Service -- to verify eligibility.

But that's all DHHS can do with social security numbers. It can't track possible identity thieves. It's restricted to using social security numbers for agency programs only, just like other Nebraska state agencies.

"I think they should run everybody's numbers, because people are slipping through," Amy Wiese-Rung said of Nebraska's state agencies.

That's the question the I-Team raised with Rep. Terry and state Sen. Janssen.

"We have to do something. And I think what we need to do is empower the individual -- so that we can check our own social security numbers to see if they're being used or abused, and then we can help protect ourselves," Rep. Terry said.

He suggested a program that would go beyond the capabilities of the "Self Check" program administered on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website. It's a program that's similar to the E-Verify program. "Self Check" allows an individual worker to verify if he or she is eligible to work in the United States.

Rep. Terry's primary concern -- about any possible changes to identity theft protections -- is an individual's right to privacy.

"What we'll have to have a debate on, in society and in Congress, is what's the balance," Rep. Terry said.

Legislation could be a long way off, but the Rung family said lawmakers need to do something.

"Or maybe it needs to be up to the employers, you know, up to the employers to check. Check every single employee you have to make sure they're legit," Wiese-Rung said.