



HALL COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

CRIME PREVENTION UNIT



CRIME PREVENTION TIP

DATE: June 29, 2009
TO: Crime Prevention Program Participants
FROM: Deputy Stephen Wilbanks
SUBJECT: **MAIL THEFT**

Recently a neighborhood watch member reported a van stopping at mailboxes with flags in the "up" position. The vehicle was rightly reported to dispatch, but it left the area before a Deputy was able to make contact. The incident raised a few questions, providing an opportunity to discuss some issues that we see in mail theft cases.

The Sheriff's Office doesn't maintain statistics specifically for mail theft, because it falls under the same code as misdemeanor theft. However, from a patrolman's perspective, I can say firsthand that these calls are not uncommon. Even more commonly, we respond to identity theft / fraud calls after the fact, and the victim has no idea how the perpetrator obtained their personal or account information. Mail theft is a very real possibility.

Several concerns exist in regard to mail theft. First is the scenario where the perpetrator is looking for checks that are placed in the mailbox for paying bills, etc. There are several ways criminals "wash" checks and then simply write in whatever information they choose, or they can print their own checks using your valid account number (modern computer and printer technology has made this method accessible to an increasing number of criminals). They may also be looking to intercept credit cards or financial documents to obtain account numbers to commit credit card fraud, or enough personal information to steal your identity and open new accounts. Unfortunately, you usually don't discover any of this until the bill collectors come calling.

Lastly, if someone has more sinister intentions, think about how much can be learned about your personal life just from looking at your mail. Think about what shows up in your mailbox during any given week and what those things tell about you. Magazine subscriptions, medical statements, insurance documents, government correspondence, birthday cards, children's mail, personal correspondence... they're all pieces of a puzzle that is much easier to complete than you might think.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- 1) Always give a second glance to a privately owned vehicle stopped at a mailbox. Many rural routes are run by people driving privately owned vehicles, but there is typically a sign on the car designating it as a postal carrier. However, don't let this be a reason for absolute dismissal of the vehicle as legitimate (magnetic car signs are easy to obtain). Most residents are familiar with their mail carrier's car, if it's not an actual postal car. If it doesn't look like your regular carrier, it may just be a substitute driver for the day, or maybe not...
- 2) Consider utilizing a post office box for all of your sensitive mail documents. Yes, it's an additional hassle and a small expense. But ask any identity theft victim how much hassle it is to straighten out that mess in comparison, and I think you'll see their side of things.
- 3) If you send outgoing mail, never use your mailbox. It might be convenient, but that little red flag in the "up" position screams "STEAL IMPORTANT STUFF HERE!" On your next trip to town simply stop by the post office and drop them in the outgoing box (preferably the one inside the building to prevent "mailbox fishing").
- 4) Consider on-line or email statements; just be certain to use secure practices with these.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact:

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