

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Looking beyond your tax refund – who's protecting your personal information?

Burnaby, March 5, 2008: This time of the year many of us look forward to receiving a tax refund - large or small. Even though the number of taxpayers filing electronic returns is increasing, for some people unable to use this service and especially those in a hurry to process their returns, there are potential serious consequences should their personal information fall into the wrong hands.

The BC Crime Prevention Association (BCCPA) is raising concerns about consumers seeking assistance with preparation of their 2007 income tax returns. Beware of unqualified tax preparation services whose motive is to gather and fraudulently misuse their clients' personal information. Also, watch out for established tax preparation services who have no privacy policy in place and who are careless with the proper protection of information they acquire during the normal course of business.

In recent years, credit industry sources have noticed a significant rise in the number of identity theft cases in which the source of the compromised information is believed to be rooted in the failure of businesses to practice basic privacy principles or even to implement such a policy. The risk is greater when the business only appears at tax time.

As of January 1, 2004 all businesses in BC are required to have a privacy policy in place and comply daily with the need for reasonable security arrangements to protect taxpayer information from unauthorized disclosure, theft and access.

"This is a perfect storm scenario," says BCCPA Executive Director Valerie MacLean, "because eager taxpayers who qualify for a refund are often more focused upon what they will do with their refund than worrying about what will happen to their tax information should it fall into the wrong hands."

The BC Crime Prevention Association offers the following tips to encourage consumers to make better choices when choosing a business to prepare their tax return:

- Be wary of any individual or business offering to assist with tax preparation that has no documented history or proven experience in handling tax returns.
- Ask preparers what professional qualifications they have that are relative to the legitimate collection and processing of your information to the Canada Revenue Agency and ask to be shown documentary proof of these qualifications.
- Before volunteering any personal documents ask the business/preparer to show you their privacy policy. For larger businesses, someone will have been designated as the Privacy Officer.
- Ask how long your tax information will be retained and how it will be disposed of.
- Remember to order annually a free copy of your credit report from Equifax Canada (1- 800- 465 -7166) and Trans Union (1-866-525-0262) to ensure that there are no enquiries from credit grantors resulting from the theft of your personal and financial information.

To learn more crime prevention tips, visit www.bccpa.org.

This news release is one of a series in which the BCCPA offers advice under its Crime Shield banner to give the public the tools they need through education and awareness to protect themselves against crime.

Our new Ask an Expert column is an additional resource for crime prevention information pertinent to British Columbia. The column can be viewed at www.bccpa.org. Topics will be frequently updated and refreshed depending upon response.

The British Columbia Crime Prevention Association (BCCPA) is a recognized team of citizens, business and police dedicated to preventing crime through community partnerships and consumer awareness.

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