

Tax Service Sees Increase in Identity Theft This Season

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COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) - The deadline to file your taxes is over, but the Better Business Bureau is urging consumers to be cautious of identity theft.



Cynthia Pelt is a multi-unit supervisor at Jackson Hewitt Tax Service. She's worked there for 13 years and said she has seen a noticeable increase in the number of identity thefts this tax season. She works at the location on Providence Road and said that store in particular has seen more than 20 cases in 2014.

"There's just been a lot of identity theft we've seen this year during tax season, including one that was a two-year-old little boy," Pelt said. "His identity was stolen this year when the parents came in, so that was really scary to see identity theft not only be adults but even as young as a two-year-old little boy."

Pelt said the workers had to handle the situation just as they would for an adult. She said people are often unaware their identity has been stolen until they come into the office to file their taxes. The Internal Revenue Service will only notify a person by mail in the event that their identity is stolen.

"A lot of times you don't know that you've had your information stolen until you go to file your tax return, and then at that point you get that letter from the IRS that does say somebody has already filed a tax return using your information or somebody has reported it to an employer that you never worked for," Better Business Bureau Regional Director Mike Harrison said. "At that point you can work with the IRS, but it's a long, drawn-out process to get that fixed."

Pelt said the IRS notifies tax services like Jackson Hewitt of a customer's stolen identity within 12 to 24 hours after assisting them.

Harrison said filing for taxes online is a common way a person's identity is stolen. Scam artists often send emails, texts or phone calls advertising phony tax services. If a consumer enters their social security number online through an unauthorized service, Harrison said they may be compromising their identity.

He attributes the increase in identity theft to more internet use.

"It's just so easy for people to get their information stolen when you're online," Harrison said. "You just need to use caution, you need to make sure that you have the most up-to-date spyware, malware protection on your computer. Make sure that you are very careful with the websites that you visit. Any of those unsolicited emails that you get, just go ahead and delete them."

Harrison also urges consumers to secure any paper documents and shred old files. He said doing research on your tax service is also a smart step in protecting yourself.