

Wells Fargo warns against identity theft

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Because of a recent computer theft, some University of Montana students who have Wells Fargo loans may need to take precautions against identity theft, a spokeswoman for the bank and lending company said.

In early October, burglars stole four laptop computers from an Atlanta company that prints loan statements for Wells Fargo, said Julia Tunis, a spokeswoman for the company. The computers contained names, addresses, social security numbers and other information for student loan and home mortgage customers, Tunis said.

Because Atlanta police are investigating the theft and because of the confidential nature of the information, Tunis was unable to say how many of the loan customers were UM students or even how many customers are affected by the theft nationwide. However, the information on the computers represented a "relatively low" number of customers, she said.

"This is an ongoing investigation and we wouldn't want to say anything that might jeopardize that information," Tunis said.

Mick Hanson, director of the UM Financial Aid department, said Wells Fargo is not a preferred lender for UM. He does not know how many UM students are affected by the theft but suspects they are few. Since the company informed him of the theft, he has only become aware of one student whose information was stolen.

Identity theft is a growing problem in the United States, Hanson said. Wells Fargo acted promptly to inform its affected customers through letters, he said, but other customers who didn't receive letters may want to contact the company and make sure they are not affected.

"Double check to see if your name was on that list," he said. "And if it was, take it very, very seriously."

Wells Fargo has no indication that any information in the computers has been misused, Tunis said. The company is offering a free one-year membership in a credit-monitoring service, which provides access to credit information and reports suspicious activity, to affected customers. Wells Fargo also recommended that those affected file a credit alert. Because credit alerts limit a customer's ability to receive "instant credit," Tunis said some customers might face a minor inconvenience.

“It might just take an extra phone call to verify you are who you say you are,” he said. Additionally, Tunis recommended that credit card holders always monitor the charges on their bills.

The October theft marked the third time thieves stole Wells Fargo computers in less than a year. Last November, a laptop was stolen from a Wells Fargo consultant in Concord, Calif. In February, a laptop containing data for thousands of customers was stolen from a running car in the Midwest. An arrest was made in the Concord incident, Tunis said, and the company is unaware of any credit fraud resulting from either incident.