

Chairman Larry E. Craig

## STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN LARRY CRAIG

At the joint hearing of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and  
the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. On behalf on Chairman Collins... as well as the Ranking Members of our two committees, Senator Akaka of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and Senator Joe Lieberman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, I want to welcome all of you to this joint hearing this morning.

First, I want to thank all of the members of our two committees for their willingness to participate jointly in this important hearing. I think the American public should understand that while this hearing is about the Department of Veterans Affairs and the compromising of sensitive, personal information about our veterans the issue of data security is a concern all across government.

As I said on the Senate floor just two days ago, nearly every agency of the Federal Government maintains sensitive information on millions of American citizens.

Most of this data is not of the classified nature. Rather, it is information compiled simply to carry out the missions and programs at various agencies. For example, the Federal Student Financial Aid Form requires that you provide your name, address, Social Security number, information on your parents and their address among many other things.

Clearly, the release of that data would be as devastating to the privacy of millions of students and their families ? as VA's breach was to the millions of veterans and their families.

Still, we are here today to talk about what the Secretary of Veterans Affairs announced to the nation this past Monday. He told my committee, and other members, that an employee of the department downloaded data on nearly 26 million veterans and then walked right out the front door with it. Subsequently, that data was stolen from his home.

Mr. Secretary ? that is just unbelievable.

How is it that VA's computer system permits one person to download the records of 26 million individuals and no one is alerted?

Candidly, to me that is not even the most absurd part of this story. What is even more mind boggling is that after he revealed the facts of the theft to his supervisors, it took 13 more days for anyone else to discover the lost data was on 26 million people.

Then it took two more days for the FBI to be notified. So, somebody lost the names, birthdays, and Social Security numbers of 26 million veterans and their families, and the FBI knew nothing for over 2 weeks.

Now, Mr. Secretary, I read your statement yesterday in the press about the anger you felt at having discovered this lapse in security nearly 13 days after it happened. You can only imagine how I, and millions of veterans felt, that you waited six more days to tell all of us!!

Mr. Secretary, I understand the need to spend some time with your staff assessing problems and reviewing options. But, I find it increasingly frustrating that decisions are made without the knowledge or input of elected officials. We represent the people and they deserve a seat at the table a little earlier in the process.

Now before I turn it over to Chairman Collins for any comments she might have, I want to say a word about the employee who took this data home.

While there is still an ongoing investigation of this situation by the FBI, as best as I can tell from the information I have thus far, he is a dedicated federal employee who took work home with the hopes of improving VA operations. Yes, his actions were inexcusable. He knew better than to take information like this home. And for his terrible lapse in judgment, he will have to face some serious consequences. But, at least he told his supervisors and law enforcement right away, which is more than I can say for everyone else in the agency from there on up.

I am not going to lose sight of the actions of everyone else in this situation. There were many lapses in judgment for which many people are going to have to answer.

I hope this hearing today will shed some light on the shortcomings in VA's data security programs and on what needs to happen to ensure such a major breach never occurs again. I also think our discussions will heighten the awareness of many other agencies across government to be vigilant about data protection and information security. As I said earlier, students, farmers, and others who seek government assistance deserve our best efforts to protect their information. But, most importantly, I hope today's hearing will provide millions of veterans and their families with answers they deserve.