

## Identity Theft

Yesterday the Miami Herald ran an article highlighting how identity theft has once again topped the list of all consumer complaints filed with the Federal Trade Commission for the eighth consecutive year.

Locally, Ernest Sparks of New Port Richey may have been the victim of identity theft when he failed to receive his economic stimulus check from the IRS.

"Like anything else, \$300 doesn't go very far but I figure well if I had it, it would pay off a credit card bill, you know," said Sparks.

Sparks called the IRS in July and was told there's a reason he would not be getting a check. "Somebody had used my name and number as a dependent on their tax form. They got my 300 dollars. I blew up. I got mad," said Sparks.

"And the law forbids us from divulging any secret taxpayer information, it's everybody's right to privacy," said IRS Special Agent Norm Meadows. Meadows is not able to talk about specific cases but says identify theft is a growing problem.

"There's lots and lots of identity theft scammers out there who file false income tax returns with the IRS in an attempt to get back a false refund," said Meadows.

Sparks isn't sure if he was the victim of identity theft, because his credit cards or bank accounts were not touched. He wonders if it had anything to do with another problem about eight months ago. Social Security told him he was dead and he had to prove he isn't.

Sparks says he hopes to find out why this happened eventually.

"I'd like to know what the real story behind it is, and if I get \$300, fine," said Sparks.

With help from Congressman Bilirakis' staff, we've been trying to get answers from the IRS. Late Thursday afternoon, we were told Ernest Spark's problem has been resolved, and he will be getting his \$300 check in a couple of weeks.

In October of 2007 Gus sponsored two Consumer Fraud and Identity Theft Seminars featuring Federal Trade Commission (FTC) officials, prosecutors and members of the law enforcement community who discussed a host of identity theft and consumer fraud issues, including how to deter, detect and defend consumers and their families from consumer and identity theft crimes. Gus even went as far as to create an Identity Theft Prevention Task Force which meets on a quarterly basis.

The task force works to review current laws and legislation related to identity theft and will recommend future legislation as needed. An additional Task Force focus is the creation of a creative and comprehensive Consumer Education Campaign in the area of ID Theft and Fraud. The group looks forward to reaching out to our constituents through a variety of mediums, including a continuously update webpage, newsletter, community outreach events, school-based education and by making a variety of materials available for distribution in numerous convenient consumer locations.

Task Force members bring with them the experience of a variety of government agencies, including the United States Secret Service, United States Postal Inspector's Office, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Attorney General's Office.

To learn more about ID theft please visit: [www.consumer.gov/idtheft](http://www.consumer.gov/idtheft)