

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 14, 2011

Dear Colleague:

I encourage you to join me in writing letters to genealogy websites urging them to remove and no longer post the Social Security numbers of deceased individuals.

Earlier this year, I learned of the plight of my constituent, Ms. Roberta Thomas. In the wake of her three-month-old daughter's death, Ms. Thomas discovered that her daughter's Social Security number was posted on various genealogy websites and that her daughter's Social Security number had been fraudulently used on an IRS tax return filing.

In response to Ms. Thomas' situation, I sent letters to the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and the Chief Executive Officer of Ancestry.com. I encouraged the FTC and SSA to investigate the practices of websites like Ancestry.com, and asked the FTC to work with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to ensure victims of this type of tax fraud are provided with a prompt remedy.

Social Security numbers of deceased individuals are available to the public through the Death Master File (DMF), which contains information on more than 82 million deceased individuals. The SSA created the DMF as the result of a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) lawsuit where the court held that, based on the Privacy Act, an individual's privacy rights are extinguished at death and required the SSA to release the Social Security number, surname, and date of death of deceased individuals.

The SSA provides the data that comprises the DMF to the Department of Commerce's National Technical Information Service (NTIS), which sells the data to various entities such as Federal, state, and local governments; financial, investigative, credit reporting, and medical research organizations; and public customers – including genealogy websites.

Many DMF purchasers use the data to prevent fraud by updating financial information and freezing deceased persons' accounts. But, DMF data can also be used for fraudulent purposes. We are all well aware that identity theft is growing problem, and posting such personally identifiable information on publicly available genealogy websites is an easy mark for criminals.

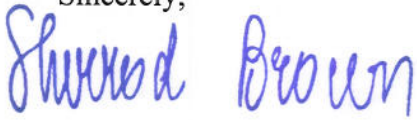
Genealogy websites are not violating the law in posting Social Security numbers, but genealogical research must be balanced against the need to protect individuals and families from identity theft and fraud. Given the breadth of information available on these websites – full names, birth dates, and death dates – Social Security numbers provide little additional benefit to family history researchers.

Please join me in the effort to educate genealogy websites about the unintended consequences of making Social Security numbers readily available to the public. Letters will be sent to the following companies due to their disclosure of Social Security numbers on their websites:

- Ancestry.com
- Genealogy.com
- Familysearch.org
- Genealogybank.com
- Genealogy.about.com
- Ssdi-search.com
- Familytreemagazine.com
- Vitalrec.com

If you would like to sign onto the letters or have any questions, please contact Erin Richardson in Senator Brown's office at 224-2315 or [Erin\\_Richardson@brown.senate.gov](mailto:Erin_Richardson@brown.senate.gov).

Sincerely,



Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator