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Utah gov to announce health data security czar

Breach • Move comes in wake of Medicaid data breach.

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Gov. Gary Herbert will hold a news conference this afternoon to discuss the Medicaid data security breach.

A news release said he will announce a new “health data security ombudsman” position at 2:30 p.m. It’s unclear what that person would do. The governor’s office and the Utah Department of Health spokesman didn’t immediately return phone calls.

But the move comes on the heels of the state seeking a public relations firm to handle “crisis communications” and rebuild trust with the public.

On March 30, hackers broke into a poorly protected Medicaid eligibility server, putting the personal information of 780,000 people at risk.

On that server were Medicaid claims and the names, birth dates, addresses, and in some cases, Social Security numbers, of retirees on Medicare, the privately insured and uninsured — information sent by health providers and billing companies to inquire about a patient’s eligibility for Medicaid.

The stolen information is not yet known to have been misused.

Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project, said an ombudsman is needed. People whose data was compromised have been frustrated by the lack of information they are provided when they call the state hot line.

“Usually a role of an ombudsman is to be kind of a safe haven person or entity folks can go to, and they should expect when they go to that person to have an impartial ear,” said Hilman, who wasn’t privy to what the new office will do.

She suggested the state could restore trust by holding leaders accountable. The information on the server wasn’t encrypted and should have been, Hilman said. “Steve Fletcher [technology services director] should have been let go. He wasn’t that he [remains] raises really serious concerns. The way you handle and store data is constantly evolving.”

The breach exposed how vulnerable health data is to misuse: Patients on private insurance or Medicare didn't realize providers were sending their information to the state to see if they qualified for state programs.

An ombudsman should look beyond the breach to focus on the security of all health information, Hilman said. Particularly as the state's health insurance exchange expands and individuals provide personal information through an online portal to see if they are eligible for health insurance.

"You're supposed to learn about whether you're eligible for public programs right on the spot. Right there that's one data system talking to another. If we don't learn from this now we're asking for it," Hilman said.

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Was your information hacked?

Protect yourself » If you've been to a Utah health provider in the past four months, or possibly the last year, your personal information may have been exposed in a state data breach. To find out, call 1-855-238-3339.

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