WHATCOM COUNTY
EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE
County Courthouse
311 Grand Ave. Suite #108
Bellingham, WA 98225

Jack Louws
County Executive

Bellingham Herald Op Ed, for print Sunday, October 9, 2016

Written by Whatcom County Information Technology Manager, Perry Rice

Cyber Security Awareness Tips

October is National Cyber Security Awareness Month. This campaign, sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security, aims to help everyone stay safer and more secure online. The theme for 2016 is that cyber security is everyone's responsibility. Whatcom County government, as custodian for key public data and systems critical to our community, is embracing this campaign as an opportunity to educate ourselves and our employees along with our community to apply stronger measures to safeguard public data and systems.

The stakes are higher than ever for keeping key Whatcom County government technology systems up and running. Since the County launched its new website in 2015, new content and features are added every day. Many services that required a trip to the County Courthouse are now available on-line. Citizens can apply for marriage licenses and jobs, search real property records, register to vote, access County Council documents and live stream Council meetings, reserve parks facilities, pay court fines, buy Lummi ferry tickets, sign up for notifications about areas of special interest, and find ready access to ever growing array of public records.

Cyber threat activity continues to increase in workplaces and at home. Information on computers can be stolen, altered, accessed, and even held for ransom. More than one-third of U.S. consumers have experienced a computer virus, hacking incident, or other cyber threat this past year.

The Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), James Comey, testified before Congress last week and said "the pervasiveness of the cyber threat is such that the FBI and other intelligence, military, homeland security, and law enforcement agencies across the government view cyber security and cyber attacks as a top priority." According to the FBI, the most prolific cyber threats include:

Ransomware – a type of malware that infects computers and restricts user access to their files or threatens the permanent destruction of their information unless a ransom is paid. In addition to individual users, ransomware has infected schools, hospitals and police departments.

Business e-mail compromise – a type of payment fraud that involves the compromise of legitimate business e-mail accounts for the purpose of conducting unauthorized wire transfers. These scams have caused estimated losses of more than $3 billion worldwide.

Intellectual property theft – involves robbing individuals or companies of their ideas and inventions following an unauthorized intrusion into private computers and networks.

At Whatcom County, we are taking a number of steps to prevent or minimize the impacts of potential threats. First, we are making our behind-the-scenes systems more secure by updating network firewalls and implementing new networking tools to better detect and respond to problems. Second, we are partnering with national cyber security organizations for access to the latest resources and intelligence. Third, and perhaps most important, we are promoting safe computing practices within our organization. These simple practices also make sense to follow at home:

- **Be wary of all e-mails with attachments.**
  Intrusive software can get into computers through attachments, especially ones with certain file extensions (.exe, .vbs, .bat, …). Even if you know the sender, make sure an attachment makes sense before you open it. A sender with bad intentions can forge addresses to mislead you. If you are unsure about an e-mail or an attachment, simply call your friend or contact to check.

- **Be wary of links.**
  Intrusive software can also gain access to your computer from clicking on a link within an email or from a website which unknowingly takes you to a malicious website. If a link looks suspicious, even if you know the sender of the e-mail, it is best not to click on it.

- **Protect personal information.**
  Be wary of requests for personal information as "verification." Do not send account numbers, social security numbers, passwords, etc. via email or text.

- **Make passwords long, strong, and unique.**
  Take special care with passwords for sensitive accounts like on-line banking and e-mail. Use security features like passcodes sent to your smartphone as part of your login process.

- **Keep security software current and updated.**
  Having the latest security software, web browser, and operating system are the best defenses against computer viruses and online cyber threats. Consider turning on automatic updates to have software automatically connect and update to defend against known risks.

- **Be cautious with USB devices.**
  Flash drives and other external devices can introduce viruses and malware to your computer. Refrain from connecting flash drives to your computer that you may find in a parking lot or other public place. Use your security software to immediately scan any flash drive that you plug into your computer.

Computer security will be an ongoing initiative for our organization. Whatcom County has over 1,200 computers with access to the Internet to protect. We operate large business systems with sensitive data supporting vital services to our citizens. In addition to prevention, we are installing stronger backup systems so we can recover data and resume operations if we do face an intrusion or disruption due to an emergency. Our daily life, economy and national security increasingly depends on reliable online computing. We encourage everyone to learn and apply techniques to stay safe online during this National Cyber Security Awareness Month.

Additional cyber security tips for individuals, parents and organizations can be found at
the National Cyber Security Alliance website - http://staysafeonline.org/

If you have questions about County IT security, please give me a call or send me an e-mail.

Perry Rice, Information Technology Manager
price@co.whatcom.wa.us
(360) 778 - 5230