Press Conference April 13, 2015

Columbus, Georgia

**U.S. Attorney Michael Moore (00:00:09 – 00:04:18) :** Well, Good Afternoon. Uh, thank you all for coming and for your coverage of this announcement today. I’m Michael Moore. I’m the United States Attorney for the Middle District of Georgia. Let me introduce before we get started a few of the folks who are here today in the room and especially standing here up front. We got uh Special Agent in Charge of the Internal Revenue Service, Atlanta Field Office Veronica Hyman-Pillot, Special Agent in Charge of the Secret Service, Atlanta Field Office Ray Moore, Harris County Sheriff Mike Jolley, uh Columbus Police Assistant Chief Lem Miller, and Columbus Police Major Gil Slouchick. So we appreciate very much they will be a part of the announcement we are making today.

We’re here this afternoon to talk about a problem that’s infiltrating virtually every part of the Middle District of Georgia, our nation and and certainly the world. I’m talking about identity theft. Uh, crimes involving identity theft have been rising at an alarming rate. In fact, about two years ago, Columbus was listed by the uh Federal Trade Commission as having the second highest number of theft occurrences in the nation. The Department of Justice along with our federal, State and local partners have been actively investigating and prosecuting these cases in an effort to bring those who wreak such havoc to justice. In 2014, uh we saw that Columbus dropped down from 2nd to 22nd in the nation but I’ll tell you there is still much work to be done. Identity theft cases involve all types of crime which the criminal wrongfully obtains and uses the victim’s personal data, like Social Security numbers, bank account numbers, credit card account numbers without their permission and for their own gain. We’ve seen tax refunds fraudulently taken. Vast amounts of credit card debt piled up only to be discovered when the victim goes to purchase a house or make another large purchase and finds that their credit has been destroyed. In cases where personal information from service men and women who had simply provided their information for medical services later found that their identities had been stolen and their lives turned upside down. Recently, uh here in the Columbus area, the Federal Grand Jury indicted Ms. Danielle Wallace for a number of counts of wire fraud and aggravated identity theft. Ms. Wallace operated here locally a tax preparation business uh in Columbus. Now the indictment which I’ll remind you of course is merely a charging document. Ms. Wallace remains innocent lest and until proven guilty by the government at trial. What the indictment does allege is part of her scheme she wrongfully submitted or caused to be submitted approximately 187 fraudulent tax returns, resulting in a loss to the IRS of approximately $494,000. And these are not victimless crimes. The damage that is done to the victim’s credit is overwhelming and the loss to the law-abiding tax payers is immense. And so today we’re here to announce that we are redoubling our efforts to combat this wave of theft. We are announcing the formation of an Identity Theft Task Force in the Middle District of Georgia. And this Task Force will initially be comprised of law enforcement officers from the Secret Service, the Internal Revenue Service, the Harris County Sheriff’s Office, and the Columbus Police Department, along with the Postal Inspector’s Office. My office will serve as a partner, and we will use our resources to see that these cases are prosecuted. Let me just simply give a message to those who are currently or who are thinking about becoming involved in this type of criminal enterprise. Let me offer you this simple word of warning: First, you need to know that we don’t bluff. Second, you should know that if we catch you, and ultimately we will, uh if we catch you stealing that personal information or Social Security numbers, we’re going to make sure you have your own very special number. And that’s going to be a federal prison inmate number. The penalties are severe and we’re serious about this. And I want to thank again the partners that we have here both on the State, federal and local level as we move forward to combat this problem here in Columbus. So with that, let me give an opportunity for uh folks and our partners here up front to make a few remarks and then we’ll be glad to take a few questions.

**SAC of IRS, Atlanta Field Office Veronica Hyman-Pillot (00:04:19 – 00:06:46)** : Good Afternoon. Stopping identity theft related refund crimes has become IRS’s number one priority. Uh it has been IRS’s priority for about three years now, since we saw an uptake uh in this problem. Basically what has been transpiring is that individuals are stealing identities from a number of sources. Uh from your local doctors’ offices to large, major corporations have suffered data breeches and that information is being used to file fraudulent tax returns as well as commit other identity theft related crimes. Uh fighting identity theft is certainly an ongoing battle as identity thieves continue to create new ways of stealing personal information and using it for their own personal financial gain. The IRS is continually reviewing its processes, policies, and procedures to determine how it is that we can slow down and eventually eradicate the amount of refunds that are being released under the assumption that the person is not the person who is actually filing the tax return. Many of the perpetrators who commit identity theft do so for their own benefit. There’s very little regard as you can imagine for the victims of these crimes. As Mr. Moore indicated earlier, this is certainly a victimless crime because not only is the American tax payer victimized but the United States Government is victimized as a result. As the number of crooks willing to steal identities and tax dollars has grown, so has the ability to track, investigate, arrest, and prosecute these cases. All of the indictments, arrests, and harsh sentences received as of late by these identity theft perpetrators is just a sample of what’s to come as we join forces with our law enforcement partners here and the United States Attorney’s Office to put an end to identity theft. We’re looking forward to furthering our partnership with the Middle District of Georgia Identity Theft Task Force. We feel that this collaboration will certainly only enhance our efforts to be able to work these crimes together and ensure that the perpetrators of these stolen identity refund frauds, crimes are brought to justice. In closing, let me reiterate that IRS point of investigation will continue to utilize its full capabilities and resources to investigate those who steal the identities of tax payers of filing false tax returns. The tax paying public should have confidence that those who steal tax dollars that do not belong to them will be held accountable. Thank you.

**Special Agent in Charge of the Secret Service, Atlanta Field Office Ray Moore**

**(00:06:47 -00:07:52)** : Good Afternoon. My name is Ray Moore. I’m the Agent in Charge of the Secret Service for the State of Georgia. The Secret Service has been battling identity theft since 1984 and we’ve been doing a pretty good job of it. As of recent, the most intrusive cases are network intrusive cases, where somebody in Russia or Eastern Europe or the Middle East, dials into your network and identifies PII (Personal Identification Information). And that’s what we’re looking to do, to bring to the table our expertise in network intrusion, computer forensics. That’s what we’re here for, to help out all the partners. Because credit card crimes and identity theft are not just local; they’re national and world-wide. And we have an agency that is world-wide and we can provide those resources and we’re looking forward to partnering with everybody here and we thank U.S. Attorney Moore for facilitating this task force. Thank you.

**Harris County Sheriff Mike Jolley (00:07:53 – 00:08:48)** : Uh, having been uh an agency head for 23 years I have seen criminal activity change over the years. And uh over the past few years we have seen it go from uh activities such as burglaries, thefts uh of a one-on-one nature to the white collar crime or the identity fraud uh type that we’re talking about now. And without the collaborative effort that we’re going into now, uh the criminals are far ahead of us. So, I’m honored to be a part of uh this type of effort that we’re putting together and an agency such as ours, as a local agency, can’t do it alone. We can’t cross the boundaries. We can’t go uh from state to state, even internationally, without uh the federal government’s help. So, we’re pleased to be a part of it. And we look forward to it. So thank y’all very much.

\*mumbles of “thank you” from those up front

**Columbus Police Major Gil Slouchick (00:08:49 – 00:09:20)** : I’m Agent Slouchick with the Columbus Police Department. And we’re excited about being a part of this task force. As you know uh identity theft is a growing crime. And the majority of the cases that we work committed by people outside the jurisdiction. As like Sheriff Jolley said, uh this partnership will give us an opportunity to reach out to those people uh who live outside of Columbus and outside of our jurisdiction and who are victimizing other people in Columbus. So we look forward to it and uh we’re committing our resources to this task force. Thank you.

\*U.S Attorney Moore : Thank you

**U.S. Attorney Michael Moore, et al. (00:09:21 – 00:14:38) :** Okay, so I hope you have taken away the commitment of the agencies involved both on all levels, State, local, and federal. And with that I would be glad to take a few questions and we would certainly let our folks up here uh jump in as well.

\*\*Pause\*\*

Reporter #1: Who’s funding the Task Force?

Moore : Uh, we ‘re really coming together as a uh individually funded unit. It’s not a new um group that will require designated funding, but uh we are all committing our independent resources and to making it.

Reporter #2 : What can consumers do, like since Target had their breech last year. You do all the checks you can but you can’t really prepare for something like that when it happens to the company. What can you say to someone like, who has that experience?

Moore : Ya know, um, I think people have to be vigilant. I think you have to, um, keep a check on your credit. Uh, I think, ya know, as individuals we can be responsible for that and look at it. I mean we can’t uh as individuals monitor every corporation that we deal with on using our credit card and other information but certainly we can do that. Uh, I spoke to a senior citizens group not too long ago and we talked about identity theft and people being afraid their credit cards had been stolen or their credit card numbers. Well, I mean one simple thing I do at the gas pump. I end on the same number. Ya know, so when I pump my gas I end on whatever it is. That way when I look at my credit card statement I can go down and I can tell pretty quick if someone’s been, ya know, gotten ahold of that that gas card. So I think it’s simple things like that that we can do. Um, I would direct people to the website for the United States Attorney’s Office for the Middle District of Georgia. There’s some links there that talk about identity theft and things the public can do at large. And we may uh roll out as well some other public service announcements and that’s what we’re doing today is moving those things forward. Anybody else?

Reporter #1 : Is there like a specific first goal? Like is there maybe something a business that is going to be shut down here in the next few months in Columbus or?

Moore : Now I won’t talk about ongoing investigations that we’re in the middle of right now. Um, but I ‘ll tell you I mean just as we I told you about Ms. Wallace’s indictment. Uh, she ran a tax preparation business and then worked at another company as well. Uh, we’re actively looking uh at companies. And uh, I think in short order you’ll probably hear uh where some, uh where this effort and this partnership is resulted in fact some additional arrests and and other cases to be prosecuted.

Reporter #1 : And you said Columbus was the 2nd in 2013 for the nation where their 22nd now?

Moore : 22nd now.

Reporter #2 : Do we know where Harris county is?

Sheriff Jolley : It’s in the north.

\*Laughs\*

Moore : I don’t know but I think

Reporter #1 : Are you guys like #1?

Sheriff Jolley : We’re the safest county in the State of Georgia.

Reporter #1 : I think you’re doing all the right..I, I think the Sheriff is a lot of (inaudible)

Moore : We had several cities in the Middle District of Georgia in 2013 rated in the top 15, um, places in the nation where these crimes were taking place. Uh, and so, um, we’ve been working those cases as you can see thanks to the good work of uh the law enforcement here in this room and other agencies who aren’t represented here today. Uh we’ve seen a decrease, uh or we’ve come down the list. But we’re not satisfied at 22nd. And so we’ll we’ll keep uh moving forward and um we’ll we’ll keep you talk about a first step. Is there a first goal? One of those goals is to drop below 22. And and so I imagine this year we will do just that.

Sheriff Jolley: And and for Harris County, what we’ve done when we got our complaints in, what we’ve been able to do is just say, “Look, you need to call someone else.” We don’t want to do that anymore. We want to be able to actively stay in touch with our citizens and say “Look, not only do you call someone else but we want to stay in touch with you and help you also.” So it’s it’s more of a hands on for us also. To where we can get along with the collaborative effort that we have here and and make sure our citizen is taken care of.

Reporter #1 : Is that why Columbus and Harris County are just involved in this and no other um Georgia agencies?

Moore : Well, we’re starting right now because some of our investigations originated with Columbus and with Harris County. Um, so they’re the initial team members. We’re happy to have anybody here who, um, ya know, anyone here who wants to become a part of the task force. We’re glad to have them. It doesn’t mean we won’t take cases that aren’t uh represented on the task force from those jurisdictions, uh but uh some of the cases started and so as we worked our way through it became apparent that this was but one way we can combat it. We got uh someone from U.S. Postal here in the room. They’re working with us. So ya know there there are agencies that may not be standing up here up front with us but are working with us.

Reporter #2 : What’s the most common form of identity theft you encounter in this area? Or does it just run the gamut between?

Moore : I think it runs the gamut. I mean we saw a great number of fraudulent credit cards, green dot cards that when we were uh having problems with. And right now obviously it’s tax time. We all think about what happens with fraudulent tax refunds and returns. Uh Um, and so, um, part of the beauty of having the IRS in on on these kinds of cases is that we can work together to combat that and we want to get that word out here certainly uh this week in particular.

\*Pause : Good

All right, well good, thank you all for coming and I want to thank again out partners and we look forward to having further announcements down the road. Thank you.