

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 1, 2011

Tim Sullivan  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
Ancestry.com Inc.  
360 West 4800 North  
Provo, UT 84604

Dear Mr. Sullivan:

We write to urge you to remove and no longer post deceased individuals' Social Security numbers on Ancestry.com – and affiliated websites including Genealogy.com, SSDI-search.com, and Familytreemagazine.com. We believe that any benefit provided by including Social Security numbers is far outweighed by the costs associated with disclosing this personal information.

Identity theft is a growing problem, and posting such personally identifiable information for public consumption provides unscrupulous individuals with the tools necessary to perpetrate all sorts of consumer fraud, including tax and credit card fraud. George Washington University Law School professor – and privacy expert – Daniel Solove has noted that the Social Security number is the “magic key” for identity thieves. We ask that you change your policy that presently gives would be thieves tools for their trade.

The Federal Trade Commission reports that in 2010 there were over 700,000 fraud-related consumer complaints and over 250,000 identity theft complaints. The economic and emotional costs associated with such fraud are astounding. Victims of identity theft are forced to undergo months, sometimes years, of struggle to put their lives back together. They report being harassed by collection agencies, denied credit and loans, and experiencing extreme stress and fear.

Posting Social Security numbers on your website is not illegal under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). However, legality and propriety are not one and the same.

Social Security numbers are closely guarded by their owners and are rarely shared even within families. Therefore, given the other information available on your website – full names, birth dates, death dates – Social Security numbers provide little benefit to individuals undertaking to learn about their familial history.

While removing the Social Security numbers is preferred, your organization could also take a common-sense measure to protect Social Security numbers by only revealing the first three digits, also known as the “area number.” This portion of the number is assigned by geographic region. As a result, these three numbers could help researchers identify an individual based on geographic location without revealing the entire Social Security number.

We appreciate your desire to provide detailed profiles of deceased individuals in order to facilitate genealogical research. Yet, it is clear that your website – because it lists decedents'

entire Social Security numbers – could be used by identify thieves to perpetrate their crimes. We implore you to consider the unintended consequences of making Social Security numbers available to anyone who accesses your website, and ask that you make simple, common-sense adjustments to your site to minimize its role in promoting identity theft.

Sincerely,



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Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator



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Bill Nelson  
United States Senator



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Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator



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Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator