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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 11, 2011

Chairman Jon Leibowitz
Federal Trade Commission
600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, District of Columbia 20580

Dear Chairman Leibowitz:

Following a report in the Cleveland Plain Dealer detailing unscrupulous Internet companies charging outrageous prices for free Social Security Administration services, I am requesting that the Federal Trade Commission look into methods to stop these companies from ripping off unsuspecting consumers.

As reported on July 7, 2011, several websites—including sscardapplication.com and simplefilings.com—charge between \$19.99 and \$44 to help individuals prepare their application for a new or replacement Social Security card. What these sites usually fail to mention to those they target is that the Social Security Administration provides this simple form for free on its website.

The Social Security form has 17 straightforward questions and takes the average applicant five minutes to fill out. However, these websites often claim that the process for completing the form is “complicated and confusing” and “time-consuming and stressful.” The wording of these sites could easily fool senior citizens or those with limited English skills into believing this service is necessary to receive a new or replacement Social Security card. These online companies profit from people’s confusion about the process.

In the past, several “imposter” sites were revealed to be charging individuals for credit reports that are provided for free by law through the AnnualCreditReport.com website. The FTC took action in these cases, investigating and bringing lawsuits against those sites with deceptive marketing techniques. The FTC has also provided public service announcements – as well as a detailed website for consumers – to educate Americans about the AnnualCreditReport.com service and warn them about deceptive sites.

I am requesting that the Federal Trade Commission investigate the practices of companies offering online Social Security application assistance. The FTC should also consider looking into options to bring public awareness to this issue. In our current economy, it is more important than ever to protect consumers from misleading or unfair business practices.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. I look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,



Sherrod Brown