

For Immediate Release
November 13, 2003

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State Representative Bill Straus (D-Mattapoisett) announced today that the House of Representatives has given approval to a bill which includes language of his that forces the State to protect the privacy of personal information of individuals and family members receiving health benefits through the Commonwealth's Group Insurance Commission. The action occurred in a House session on November 13, 2003.

The bill includes language offered by Rep. Straus that prohibits the State from using social security numbers for identification purposes on members' health identification cards. The bill allows individuals to request a separate identification number on their benefit cards.

"Currently, plan participants are forced to use their social security numbers for identification purposes. By forcing the Commission to issue a separate identification number, members will be protected from the possibility of identity theft and fraudulent abuse of their personal information," stated Straus.

Identity theft is the top consumer complaint in America. It occurs when an imposter obtains key pieces of information such as Social Security and driver's license numbers to obtain credit, merchandise and services in the name of the victim. The victim is left with a ruined credit history and the time-consuming and complicated task of regaining financial health.

Recent studies have show that the incidents of identity crime are on the rise, leaving devastation in its wake. Nationally, an estimated 7 million consumers became victims of identity theft during 2002, an 80% increase over the previous year. It is estimated that this will cost roughly \$53 billion dollars annually, and with incidents increasing, so will the overall costs.

"The emotional and economic impacts of identity theft are major concerns of mine and I have offered numerous pieces of legislation to help address this growing crisis," stated Straus. "Hopefully, this is the first step of many which will help protect consumers from the devastation caused by identity theft," continued Straus.

The bill was passed by the House and is awaiting action in the Senate before being sent to the Governor for his consideration.