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LAW DIRECTOR ADVISORY **ALERT: MAIL THEFT ON THE RISE IN NORTHEAST OHIO**

Numerous complaints have been made by residents to local authorities recently about having had personal checks stolen from mail that had been deposited in USPS signature blue collection boxes. This crime is not unique to Parma. Thousands of mail thefts have been reported in the Northeast U.S. in the past two years; Approximately \$200,000 in checks were stolen from a collection box outside a New Orleans post office last year; and mail theft in Peachtree City, Georgia got so bad that the police department warned residents on Facebook to stop dropping their mail at the main collection box in town.

Mail theft is about as old as the postal service itself. In current circumstances, thieves are using a tactic known as mailbox fishing to pluck envelopes out of collection boxes. Mailbox fishing usually involves dropping a handmade tool consisting of string tied to a sticky rodent trap or bottle slathered in glue into a collection box, reeling in envelopes stuck to the device, and sifting through the stolen mail for cash, checks, and gift cards. Other tools of the trade include double sided duct tape placed on the lower ledge of a box's pulldown lid to catch envelopes, and special master keys (a/k/a arrow key) stolen from the USPS which enable the thieves to open any USPS controlled mail entry/exit point such as blue collection boxes, parcel lockers, cluster box units at apartment and condo buildings, and even some gated communities.

After a successful catch, thieves employ old-fashioned methods to alter checks. Common household cleaning products such as bleach, nail polish remover, or paint thinner are used to wash the ink off checks. They then change the name of the payee, increase the value of the payment, and deposit the altered check via an ATM or smart phone. In various iterations of the scheme, thieves deposit altered checks into their personal account, or into the account of an accomplice, or even into the account of an unsuspecting third party whose personal identifying information was stolen and used to open the fraudulent bank account. The more sophisticated thieves will keep the payment amount below a certain threshold to avoid detection.

The USPS is replacing and retrofitting mailboxes in areas particularly impacted by this scam to eliminate the pull-down handle in favor of a slender mail slot. At a cost of \$700 to \$1,200 per box however, this change may take the USPS a long time to fully implement. In the interim, consider no longer using checks and adopt a new, modern modality of payment. If you can't or simply won't

stop using checks, please heed the following advice on ways to protect yourself against mailbox fishing.

Recommended Actions Before Mail Theft:

- Definitely do not mail envelopes containing anything of value from your mailbox. Also, do not deposit envelopes in Postal Service mailboxes located on street corners or other public places. Best practice is to drop off your mail inside a postal office.
- Limit the amount of personal identifying information on your checks. Do not include your social security, driver's license, credit card, or telephone numbers on your checks. Thieves can use this information to literally steal your identity to open credit accounts in your name which they control.
- Print your checks on laser or bubble jet printers. Both use heating elements that melt and fuse toner particles into paper fibers making the ink resistant to chlorine-based and acetone-based chemicals. Note that ink jet is more susceptible to "washing."
- Write your checks with gel pens, like the Pilot G2 Premium or Uniball 207. Gel-based inks contain tiny particles of color that are trapped into paper fibers, making check washing difficult. Avoid using ballpoint pens and markers as the pigment of their dye-based inks is more easily dissolvable.
- Cap spending limits on your debit and credit accounts. Your banking institution(s) will deny any attempted transfer in excess of your imposed limit and alert you of the potentially fraudulent activity.

Recommended Actions After Mail Theft:

- Monitor your checking account online to detect any irregularities. Also, reconcile your banking statement within 30 days of receipt. You may be liable for unauthorized transactions if you fail to report and dispute the fraud within 30 days of receiving the statement on which the fraudulent transaction appears.
- Contact your bank to report lost or altered checks. Depending on the magnitude of the fraudulent activity, you may want to freeze or even cancel your account altogether to prevent additional losses and damage to your credit rating.
- If you suspect fraud and the check hasn't cleared, request your bank issue a stop payment on the fraudulent check. Fees for stopping a check vary from one bank to another, but generally run around \$15 to \$35 per check. A stop payment typically lasts for 6 months.
- Notify your creditors, financial agencies, utility companies, etc. what has occurred and have them place an alert on your accounts for any unusual activity.
- Report mail theft to the U.S. Postal Inspection Service by calling (877) 876-2455 or online at postalinspectors.uspis.gov.
- File a police report of the crime with the Parma Police Department located at 5555 Powers Blvd. You may also contact the Parma Police Department at their nonemergency number, (440) 885-1234.

Timothy G. Dobeck has been the elected Law Director and Chief Prosecutor for the City of Parma since 1999.