



Illinois Business Journal

Vol. 21 No. 7 • April 2021

ID theft still the rage in COVID era

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Unlike many legitimate businessmen, scammers have not been sidelined by COVID-19. The ID theft business is alive and well.

A recent count shows at least 60,451 identity theft cases have been reported in Illinois since Jan. 1, 2020.

State Rep. Katie Stuart, D-Edwardsville, sponsored a March seminar on the topic, hosted by a representative of the Illinois Office of the Comptroller, who offered measures for businessmen and others to protect themselves.

Yaw Kesse, the office's program manager, said people, even children, are still falling victim to scams, despite the constant drumbeat of publicity surrounding hackers. Sometimes, people's first clue is when they realize an unauthorized line of credit has been opened under their name.

"That's the moment they realize their credit is shot because of something out of their control," he told people during the seminar.

Thefts involving some \$44.25 million were reported last year. One out of 15 U.S. adults was a victim. One out of five Americans find credit report errors and only 79 percent of them are able to fix the errors.

Such fraud generally involves unlawful use of Social Security numbers, credit card information and bank accounts.

Be careful about sharing such information with people you don't know — and for that matter the people you do.

"Even employers will ask you for Social Security numbers, just be careful when sharing it," Kesse said. "See if the whole number is needed, or only the last four digits."

COVID-19 itself drove much of the fraud seen by the office in the past year, he said.

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As business suffered, area's blood supply did, too

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

The Mississippi Valley Regional Blood Center is the sole supplier of blood products for almost 120 hospitals in four states, but in these pandemic-pressed times that supply is in short supply.

Jim Watts, manager of donor and government relations, and Amanda Hess, director of donor and public relations, laid out the ramifications of shuttering businesses in the past year, a move that affected a prime source of blood collected and sent out to hospitals in Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Missouri, 27 of them in the Bi-State area.

"This is a critical time for us," Hess said. "It's impacted us significantly."

"With people staying at home, and business employees working remotely, that's certainly taking a toll on our blood drive operations," Watts said. "We have not been able to have as many mobile blood drives, like those we typically do in a conference room at work. With 50 percent of employees now working at home, we have to rely on donors to come in to our donor centers."

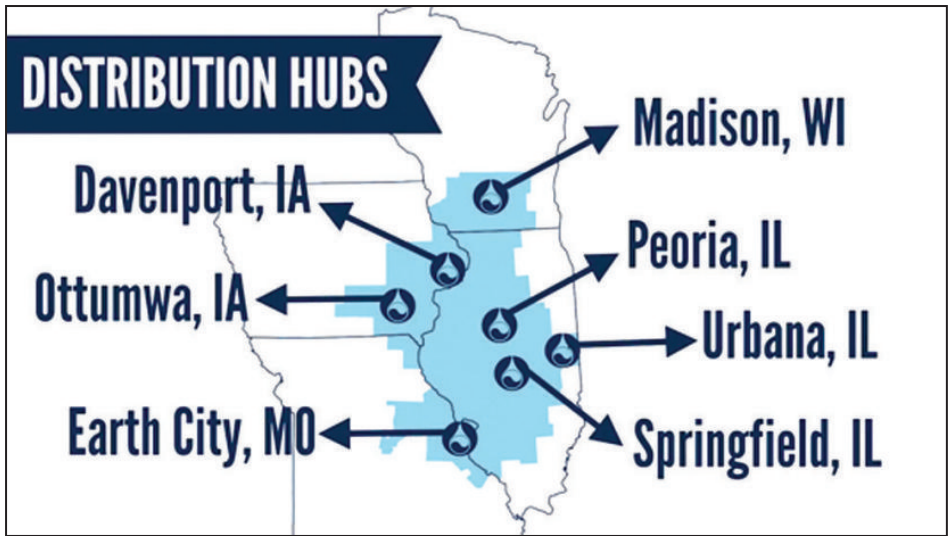
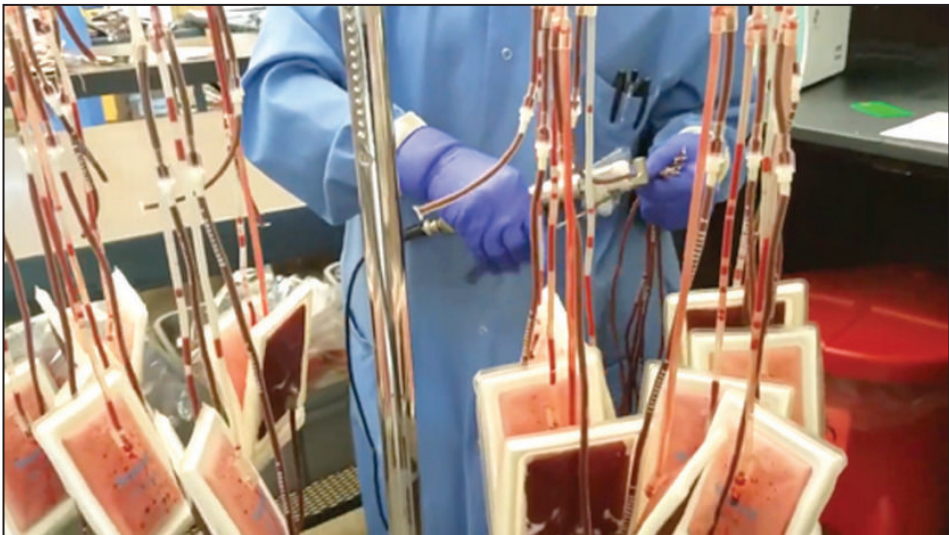
In March, the two representatives presented their case to members of the Leadership Council of Southwestern Illinois, hoping to garner the support of businesses and organizations that help drive progress in Metro East.

Hess said 60 percent of the collected blood typically comes from mobile drives. Lately, that has been closer to 40 percent.

"We don't expect that to improve until the general population has been vaccinated," she said. A safe environment for collection is crucial, she said.

People who have been vaccinated are still eligible to donate blood, as are those who have actually had COVID-19, she said.

Every week, Mississippi Valley needs donation of about



3,500 red cell blood units to meet demand. The number has recently been closer to 3,200, they said.

"We are definitely not back to normal," Hess said. "We are still seeing about a 20 percent loss in donations each week from what we would during nonpandemic times. We need about a five- to seven-day shelf life of every type. We've been running consistently at three days or less for many of these blood types. Everything that's coming in the door is turning around and getting right back to hospitals."

What that means is not have the "the surge capacity" to handle massive transfusion protocols. She cited the

weather and power outages in Texas.

"Normally we would have had enough blood on the shelves to supply our local hospitals and to also support blood center friends in Texas, to help through that crisis. We were unable to send them anything and that was unusual for us."

Everything revolves around people being vaccinated and the return of businesses and schools.

"We need more organizations to get back in the habit of having blood drives. About 17 percent of our blood products come from young donors in high schools and colleges," Watts said.

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Professionals to offers series of small-business discussions

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

At a time when small businesses really could use a hand, a group of professionals is coming together to offer one in Southwestern Illinois.

A steering committee is putting together a series of free virtual business seminars that will be held during National Small Business Week on May 4, 5 and 6.

The event will be held live at the Four Points by Sheraton, 319 Fountains Parkway in Fairview Heights, with four satellite locations also carrying the feed. Topics important to the workplace will be offered, from financing business to increasing productivity to dealing with human resources issues.

The agenda calls for six and perhaps more presentations spread over the three

days. They would be about 45 minutes each, she said. The schedule is now set as 10 a.m. to noon and 2 to 4 p.m. each day. Question/answer sessions will be included.

Participants can watch as little or as much as they would like, said Jo Ann Di Maggio May, director of the Illinois Small Business Center for the Metro East at SIUE. She is on the committee spearheading the effort, which has attracted a

number of businesses as sponsors and several of their representatives as speakers.

Di Maggio May is working closely with the Midwest Business Institute, based in Edwardsville. Traditionally, each has offered its own events for Small Business Week. Plans were scrubbed by COVID a year ago.

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