

Safe neighborhoods are a hallmark of our close-knit rural communities. We all work together to keep our streets free of crime and dangers that could harm us and our children. The moment any of us goes on the Internet, however, the safe conditions outside our four walls change dramatically. Online, we are all on our own to be diligent, safe and responsible.

In April, a cyber attack against the Sony PlayStation network resulted in the theft of over 77 million account holders' personal information. Since then, Fox Networks, Citigroup, Lockheed Martin, PBS, Brinks Security, the U.S. Senate, the International Monetary Fund and even the Central Intelligence Agency have all experienced cyber attacks. In most all of these instances the personal data of individuals was compromised and in some cases publicly posted.

This disturbing news points to the growing need for the government, businesses, and individuals to take seriously the issue of cyber security.

Cyber-crime is already covered by federal law, but safety on the Internet demands strict enforcement of measures to protect user privacy and safety. Federal agencies such as the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission have a strong mandate from Congress to prosecute identity theft, phishing and online stalking.

But enforcement alone will not prevent all of these criminal actions. The web-using public must also employ common sense and exercise caution – especially with personal information.

And the attempts to trick email and Internet users into divulging their personal information have gotten even more sophisticated. The email may look exactly like the website of your bank. It may use an identical copy of your credit card's logo. It might even reference personal information about you gained by stealing or buying information from an online database. The point is, trust no one.

I know numerous people who are victims of these types of attacks. The aftermath is difficult: loss of privacy, unsecure financial data, stolen online passwords and destroyed credit ratings. Pause a moment before you click on a link and think.

Several government agencies have coordinated to create a website that helps individuals and families identify trusted websites. In this way, Internet users can email, share photos, buy products, play games and find news in a safe way. [OnGuardOnline.gov](https://www.onguardonline.gov) is a resource for anyone who uses the Internet – no matter how savvy – to learn more about protecting your privacy and your identity.

The site includes tips like how to create secure passwords and account information, how to secure your home or office wireless network and even how to set up virus detection software for your machine. A separate section outlines the dangers to children from online predators and tells parents how to make the Internet safe for their loved ones.

Taking a minute to learn more about some simple and free security measures can make the difference between using the Internet as it was intended and losing sensitive information to criminals.

Still, the best tool that we have against cyber-threats is our brains. Before sending an email with your bank password or downloading a file from an unknown email address, stop for a second and think before you click.