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Guidebook Designed to Help Judges Protect Their Personal Privacy

(For complimentary copies of the booklet, send your request to itcenter@jmls.edu)

The desire to protect judges and their families from the wrath of the public outside of the courthouse has led to the publication of a 20-page guide that offers tips on how best to protect one's privacy.

"Protecting Your Personal Privacy," a collaborative effort of The Center for Information Technology and Privacy Law at The John Marshall Law School and the Chicago Bar Association (CBA), is an easy-to-read informational booklet that has been distributed to all federal judges in the 7th Circuit, and now is being distributed to other federal circuits as well as state court judges. The booklet has been made available to the families of judges through the Judicial Family Institute and is also available to the general public.

"It has been very well received said Collins T. Fitzpatrick, circuit executive for the U.S. Court of Appeals, 7th Circuit. "It's a terrific help to anyone who follows it."

"A series of events, starting with the murders of family members of U.S. District Court Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow, raised awareness of both physical and informational security and safety for judges and their families," said the booklet's chief author Leslie Ann Reis, director of the Center for Information Technology and Privacy Law.

The CBA called together members of the federal and state judiciary, academics and leading practitioners to propose ways judges and their family members could protect their security and safety.

Committee members initially were "shocked" by the amount of information available on judges and the vulnerabilities created by the misuse of that information, Reis said. The booklet is meant to empower judges by outlining ways that personal information can be protected from public availability by limiting the amount of one's personal information that is put into the public domain.

"We found there was no real guidance out there that would allow judges to proactively protect their privacy," Reis said. "Our approach (in developing the booklet) was how to keep the

information from getting into the public domain in the first place, rather than legislating and criminalizing the disclosure of information.

“Availing yourself to the conveniences of modern-day living involves giving up a certain amount of privacy. We aren’t telling judges what to do. What information you share and with whom is a cost benefit analysis that everyone has to make for themselves,” she noted.

Reis, who has been studying and teaching privacy law the past 10 years, said the booklet is “helping to raise awareness among the judges of the potential dangers, and empowering them to make reasoned uses of their personal information.”

The booklet has suggestions as simple as not providing information for directories or product rebates, to the more detailed outlines, including creating land trusts so that personal information is not tied to real estate transactions in the public record.

“We all know the benefits of technology. What needs to be decided is how much personal information you’re willing to exchange to gain those benefits,” Reis said. “If you follow the tips we give, you’ll have the tools to make a reasoned decision.”

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