The Doors and Windows Are Locked, but . . .

You may be careful about locking your doors and windows, and keeping your personal papers in a secure place. But, depending on what you use your personal computer for, an identity thief may not need to set foot in your house to steal your personal information. SSNs, financial records, tax returns, birth dates, and bank account numbers may be stored in your computer – a goldmine to an identity thief. The following tips can help you keep your computer and your personal information safe.

- Update your virus protection software regularly, or when a new virus alert is announced. Computer viruses can have a variety of damaging effects, including introducing program code that causes your computer to send out files or other stored information. Be on the alert for security repairs and patches that you can download from your operating system's website.

- Do not download files sent to you by strangers or click on hyperlinks from people you don't know. Opening a file could expose your system to a computer virus or a program that could hijack your modem.

- Use a firewall program, especially if you use a high-speed Internet connection like cable, DSL or T-1, which leaves your computer connected to the Internet 24 hours a day. The firewall program will allow you to stop uninvited guests from accessing your computer. Without it, hackers can take over your computer and access your personal information stored on it or use it to commit other crimes.

- Use a secure browser – software that encrypts or scrambles information you send over the Internet – to guard the security of your online transactions. Be sure your browser has the most up-to-date encryption capabilities by using the latest version available from the manufacturer. You also can download some browsers for free over the Internet. When submitting information, look for the "lock" icon on the browser's status bar to be sure your information is secure during transmission.

- Try not to store financial information on your laptop unless absolutely necessary. If you do, use a strong password – a combination of letters (upper and lowers case), numbers and symbols. Don't use an automatic log-in feature which saves your user name and password so you don't have to enter them each time you log-in or enter a site. And always log off when you're finished. That way, if your laptop gets stolen, it's harder for the thief to access your personal information.

- Before you dispose of a computer, delete personal information. Deleting files using the keyboard or mouse commands may not be enough because the files may stay on the computer's hard drive, where they may be easily retrieved. Use a "wipe" utility program to overwrite the entire hard drive. It makes the files unrecoverable. For more information, see Clearing Information From Your Computer's Hard Drive (www.hq.nasa.gov/office/oig/hq/harddrive.pdf) from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

- Look for website privacy policies. They answer questions about maintaining accuracy, access, security, and control of personal information collected by the site, as well as how information will be used, and whether it will be provided to third parties. If you don't see a privacy policy, consider surfing elsewhere.