Hackers Possibly Accessed Data on 1.3M Clients at Florida's Broward Health

The cyberattack did not involve ransomware or disrupt patient care, says Broward Health of southeast Florida.

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Cyberattackers breached the computer system of Broward Health in Florida, possibly accessing the personal data, such as Social Security numbers and medical records, of over 1.3 million of its clients and employees. However, "there is no evidence the information was actually misused," according to Broward Health, which operates over 30 health care facilities in southeast Florida and serves nearly 2 million people, offering everything from HIV and COVID-19 treatment to cancer and heart health services as well as general and emergency care.

In a notification of the data breach, Broward Health describes what happened:

> On October 15, 2021, an intruder gained entry to the Broward Health network through the office of a third-party medical provider permitted to access the system to provide health care services. Broward Health discovered the intrusion on October 19, 2021, and promptly contained the incident, notified the FBI and the Department of Justice (DOJ), required a password reset for all employees and engaged an independent cybersecurity firm to conduct an investigation. Broward Health also engaged an experienced data review specialist to conduct an extensive analysis of the data to determine what was impacted, which determined some patient and employee personal information may have been impacted. The DOJ requested the Broward Health briefly delay this notification to ensure that the notification does not compromise the ongoing law enforcement investigation.

> The personal medical information accessed included name, date of birth, address, phone number, financial or bank account information, Social Security number, insurance information and account number, medical information including history, condition, treatment and diagnosis, medical record number, driver's license number and email address. This personal information was exfiltrated (removed from Broward Health's systems), however, there is no evidence the information was actually misused.

“Patient care was not disrupted or impacted at any time during or following this incident,” Jennifer Smith, a spokesperson for Broward Health, told CNN.

The breach became public, CNN reports, because about 470 of Broward Health’s clients live in Maine, which requires organizations that store residents’ data to disclose when they’ve been hacked.

The attackers gained entry to Broward Health’s computer system through a third-party medical provider. As CNN points out, such breaches illustrate that health care providers can be vulnerable to hacks through their supply chains.

Broward County, home to Fort Lauderdale, is the second most populated county in Florida, after Miami-Dade. The bordering counties have high rates of HIV.

Both counties are included in the federal initiative titled “Ending the HIV Epidemic: A Plan for America.” It identifies 48 counties in the nation plus Washington, DC, and San Juan, Puerto Rico, that together account for 50% of new HIV cases, with the goal of targeting resources to those areas. The following seven counties in Florida are on the list:

- Broward County
- Duval County
- Hillsborough County
- Miami-Dade County
- Orange County
- Palm Beach County
- Pinellas County.

Florida reported that nearly 4,400 people tested positive for HIV in 2019, more new diagnoses than any other state, according to reports from last summer. In terms of infection rates—the average number of people per 100,000 residents diagnosed with HIV in 2019—Florida was third in the nation; Washington, DC, topped the list, followed by Georgia.

How’s your state faring in its efforts to end HIV according to the nation’s plan? Find out with the interactive AHEAD dashboard. To learn more about “Ending the HIV Epidemic,” read an overview at HIV.gov and visit the official webpage at HRSA.org. For a related POZ article, see “Plans to End the HIV Epidemic at Home and Abroad.”

Health advocates worry that rates could increase because fewer people are getting tested and accessing care due to COVID-19 shutdowns. For more details see “Guess Which State Leads the Nation in New HIV Cases.”

In related news, The Campbell Foundation, which funds HIV research globally and is located in Fort Lauderdale, recently awarded Holiday Hug grants to 10 Florida groups serving people with HIV.

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