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New class action over Ottawa's data breach

By: Staff Writer

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OTTAWA -- Another day, another lawsuit over a massive privacy breach.

The federal government now faces a third class-action suit over the loss of a portable hard drive containing personal information about more than half a million people who took out student loans.

The law firms of Sutts, Strosberg LLP, Branch MacMaster LLP and Falconer Charney LLP are seeking \$600 million in compensation on behalf of those affected by the loss of the hard drive.

This latest class-action lawsuit comes on the heels of two similar actions launched this week. Last week, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada revealed it had lost a device containing data on 583,000 Canada Student Loans Program borrowers from 2000 to 2006. The missing files include student names, social insurance numbers, dates of birth, contact information and loan balances of borrowers, as well as the personal contact information of 250 department employees.

Borrowers from Quebec, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories during this time period are not affected.

No banking or medical information was on the portable device.

The loss of the hard drive from an office in Gatineau, Que., across the Ottawa River from Parliament Hill, came to light as the department looked into another breach -- a missing USB key containing the personal information of more than 5,000 Canadians.

Human Resources went public with the second, more far-reaching loss last week -- more than two months after an employee discovered an external hard drive was missing.

"We are shocked that the government of Canada has known about this breach of privacy for so long without revealing to the country what happened," Falconer Charney lawyer Ted Charney said in a statement.

The department had no comment on the lawsuits.

"Should litigation be formally commenced, the Department (of) Justice will respond on behalf of HRSDC," a spokesperson said in an email.

The RCMP and the privacy watchdog are investigating the lost data.

Human Resources is sending letters to affected people, for whom it has current contact information, to advise them on how to protect their personal information.

A toll-free number has been set up at 1-866-885-1866 (or 1-416-572-1113 for those outside North America) to help people determine whether they are affected.

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