

Local family fights back after dead child's ID stolen

Issue heard by U.S. Senate

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CINCINNATI - An I-Team investigation about the identity theft of babies who have passed away has made it into testimony in the U.S. Senate.

A local couple is hoping hearings on Capitol Hill will help future families avoid what they've had to endure.

It was tragic enough when Ryan and Amanda Minser had to bury their first-born, Audrey, who died of sudden infant death syndrome at just 7 months old.

Then someone stole her identity and filed income taxes claiming the Minsers' daughter as their own. The Minsers' tax returns got rejected, and they had to start a long fight with the IRS to prove their parentage.

Now the Senate is looking into whether what happened to the Minsers may be a pattern for parents like them across the nation.

The loss of the Minsers' daughter was made worse when someone found Audrey's name and social security number on a list the government releases after death. That taxpayer then claimed Audrey as a deduction, forcing the Minsers through a nightmarish process rehashing their loss with the IRS.

"We have to go through the process of proving that she is actually our daughter," Amanda Minser explained.

If that wasn't bad enough, our original I-Team report showed there were at least seven other families across the country who faced the same experience, including a couple we spoke to in Baltimore.

Stephanie and Terry McClung told us, "It just brings all that grief and heartache, you know, back to the surface and I think that someone would be so, so mean and calculating. To actually steal a dead baby's social security number just to make some money is just wrong."

The McClungs lost their precious 5-month-old daughter Katelyn to SIDS, only to find the same fate as the Minsers come tax time.

"The returns were rejected because someone else had already claimed her," Terry said.

The McClungs also couldn't get any information on who had claimed their child. The IRS told them it was investigating but that most likely the only repercussion for the other person would be to have to re-file correctly.

Terry McClung couldn't believe it and said, "As long as the other person amended their return, it all goes away. They need to punish them in whatever way it takes to stop this."

Now the Senate is holding hearings to look into taxpayer identity theft, including the families the McClungs represented on Capitol Hill.

He told Senators, "Stephanie and I and all the other victims can only hope that the IRS will get tougher on these criminals and prevent future families from having to go through all this on top of the anguish of losing a child."

Terry McClung included our original report in his testimony and talked of the frustration all the families endured saying, "When I called the IRS, I was told I had to talk to the social security administration. When I called the social security administration, I was told I'd have to deal with the IRS."

It's the same story the Minsers remember. And since they spoke to us they say they've met three other local families who lost children -- and had the same experience with their tax returns.

Hagit asked them about the problem, "So you think this might be more widespread than anyone is admitting?"

"I do," Amanda Minser responded. "It just seems coincidental. I mean, of the three, I only know three families locally who have had the unfortunate circumstance to go through this and for us all to be in this same situation and to be able to talk about it makes me wonder. You wonder how widespread the problem actually could be."

The Minsers may have moved, but reminders of Audrey dot their new home next to a new photo album ready to be filled. Audrey's baby brother is due in two months.

Amanda Minser shared her mixed emotions.

"Very happy, very hopeful, but makes you sad and you still always remember what you had before," she said.

The families say one simple solution would be to withhold publishing the social security numbers of deceased for one year, enough time for families to file without strangers having access to that private information.

The IRS never gave any families more information other than that at least three of the eight were linked to the same tax preparer, and others were filed in the same state.

The Minsers are related to Mary Minser, Vice President of Human Resources for the newspaper division of Scripps, the parent company of WCPO.