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City News Hound

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On January 23, Congressman Dan Lipinski (IL03) unveiled a bill to stop the illicit sale of telephone records. The Secure Telephone Operation (STOP) Act will make it illegal to sell private phone information such as the telephone numbers called by a user. It is already illegal to acquire this type of information without the consent of the phone customer, but it is not easy to prosecute the perpetrators.

"Unscrupulous brokers, many working on the Internet, offer our personal information to anybody who will pay their price," Congressman Lipinski said. "This is an invasion of our privacy that will only be stopped when we change the law to make it easier to prosecute."

"Right now there is not a law that makes it illegal to sell this information," Lipinski continued. "So, the only way to stop these brokers is to prosecute them for obtaining the information illegally, a crime covered by a patchwork of federal laws, with the enforcement split between the Department of Justice, the Federal Communications Commission, and the Federal Trade Commission. My bill would change this."

By prohibiting the sale of the telephone records, STOP would go further than the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which currently only restricts methods used to obtain customer data from telephone companies.

Responsibility for prosecuting violations would be given solely to the Department of Justice and the penalty would be large enough - up to ten years in federal prison to discourage the practice.

"The sale of this information is dangerous for law enforcement personnel working undercover and for the people victimized by stalkers, such as battered women," Lipinski said. "This bill will help end this practice which is not only a threat to privacy, but also a threat to the safety of vulnerable individuals."

STOP is narrowly tailored to allow law enforcement to continue legal retrieval of information and to permit legitimate commercial purposes such as the creation of telephone books.