

msnbc.com

Child obesity rising faster in rural America

Research dispells belief that farm areas make leaner bodies



Gene J. Puskar / AP
Ray Crawford, 16, of Windber, Pa., participates in an aerobics class for children. In rural towns across the nation, the percentage of overweight children has soared and childhood obesity is increasing at an alarming rate, health officials say.

AP Associated Press

updated 3/13/2005 7:25:20 PM ET

WINDBER, Pa.— When Ray Crawford walks down the hallway of his school, the beefy, 240-pound sophomore says he doesn't stand out much. Many of his classmates are heavy, too.

"We go to the Eat 'n Park to meet and chill, maybe don't eat the right things," he said, referring to a regional chain restaurant famous for its smiley-faced cookies. "There's not much else to do."

Here in his small hometown in the mountains of Western Pennsylvania and in other rural communities like it, many health officials say the tide of obesity is rising faster than

anywhere else.

And new research appears to back them up, dispelling a long-held belief that in farm communities and other rural towns, heavy chores, wide expanses of land and fresh air make leaner, stronger bodies.

"Whatever the situation was, rural areas are leading the way now ... they're ahead of the curve," said Michael Meit, director of the University of Pittsburgh Center for Rural Health Practice. "Something's happened."

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania released a study recently that used state health figures to compare the body-mass index of seventh-graders in urban and rural communities — more than 25,000 students in all.

About 16 percent of urban students qualified as obese, according to the study, which is in line with national average for children ages 6-19. In rural school districts, however, 20 percent of students were considered obese.

More alarmingly, researchers found that during the years of the survey, between 1999 and 2001, the number of obese students in rural school districts rose about 5 percent, more than twice the rate of their urban counterparts.

The same trends are being reported from New

Print Powered By 



Mexico to Michigan to West Virginia.

In Michigan, children in rural areas were 3 percent to 9 percent more likely to be obese, researchers found. In rural North Carolina children had a 50 percent greater chance of being obese.

Mostly rural states have done studies that don't distinguish between urban and rural children, but they have found the incidence of childhood obesity to be far greater than the national average.

More than a quarter of all fifth-graders in West Virginia are obese, where two-thirds of the population is rural. One in four public school children in Arkansas are obese.

"It is accelerating," said Dr. Darrell Ellsworth, director of cardiovascular disease research at the Windber Research Institute.

Ellsworth is trying to start a childhood obesity clinic to stave off a wave of diabetes and heart disease he believes will overwhelm this region if nothing is done. In a room with 14 children doing aerobic exercise at the Windber Medical Center, he nodded toward the teens and adolescents, saying they will have a much higher rate of disease than their parents or grandparents.

Researchers are not ready to point a finger at any one culprit for rural obesity, but they have some theories. For one thing, with fewer family farms and more mechanization, children are not burning many calories, but they're still eating high-calorie meals.

"...Habits are passed vertically from Grandma on down, but the diet of three decades ago just doesn't work today," said Dr. Jeff Holm of North Dakota.

The Center for Health Promotion at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine, where Holm is senior scientist, is following about 500 third- to fifth-graders over three years with hopes of finding a pattern.

Fewer farmers does not explain why Windber, a former coal-mining town named after a coal-mining company, would have the same problem.


One connection might be found in the satellite dishes, computers and game consoles that have popped up in almost every town, regardless of the region's economic engine. The same technology is found in cities and suburbs, but health officials say it arrived later and spread much more rapidly in rural areas, changing behavior dramatically in a very short time.

The only other place where researchers are finding obesity rates similar to rural America is in the poorest, most troubled urban neighborhoods, suggesting that poverty may be the overriding cause.

In Tioga County in northeast Pennsylvania, where farming has declined and poverty has risen to about 20 percent, one in 10 kindergartners were found to be obese in 2001-2002. That number doubled for eighth-graders.

"We've seen it sneaking up on us, we've known it's a problem, and now it's reaching epidemic proportions," said Anne Loudenslager, who heads the Tioga County Partnership for Community Health. "We are using a good portion of our limited resources to stop this."

Wellsboro Area High School, the largest in the county with 580 students, will alter physical

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



education next year to allow student choices: sports team-oriented, wellness classes, and traditional gym classes.

Dr. Ellsworth, in Windber, said he hopes to have several hundred children in a new health program this year. He calls himself an optimist.

During a recent health fair in Connellsville, about 40 miles to the west, Ellsworth found that 60 percent of adults tested had metabolic syndrome, a collection of unhealthy conditions that raise the risk for diabetes and heart disease.

“The numbers for obesity in children were nowhere near what they are today and you can just imagine what we’re going to be looking at 10 to 20 years from now if nothing is done,” he said. “That 60 percent ... that’s going to seem like a pretty low figure.”

Ray Crawford, who is 16, lifts weights year-round in preparation for football season. Round-faced and 5-foot-9, he looks every bit the lineman he is for the Windber Ramblers. Now he says he’ll also take up cardiovascular exercise, along with the weight-lifting.

“I’ve started trying to take it easy on the junk food,” he says.

Crawford’s father died of heart disease about eight years ago. He was 45.

© 2011 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Sponsored links

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

WORKING SMARTER Townships Find the Answer in the Right Software

Pennsylvania

MARCH 2010 ■ www.psats.org

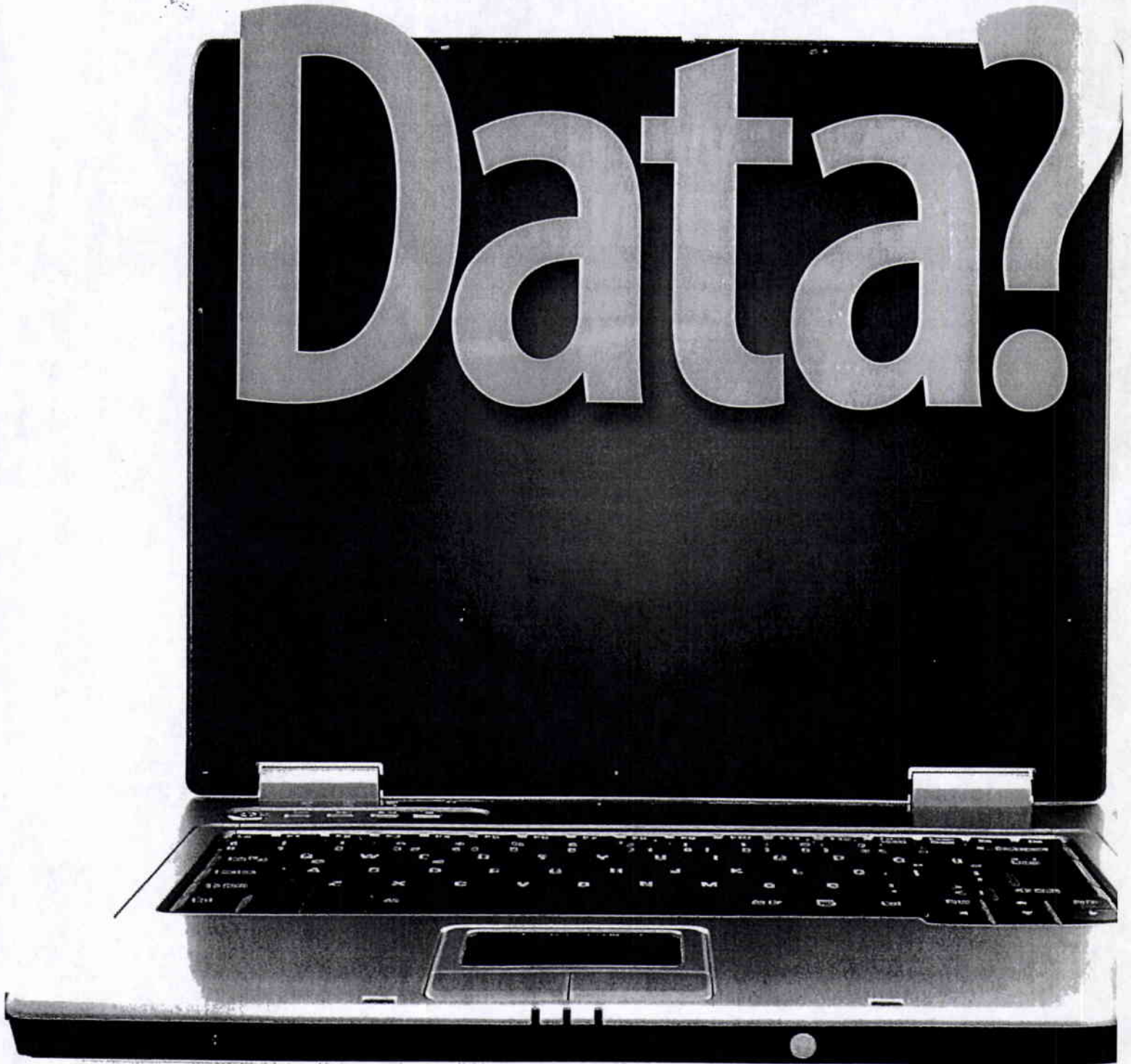
Township News

Protecting Your Data

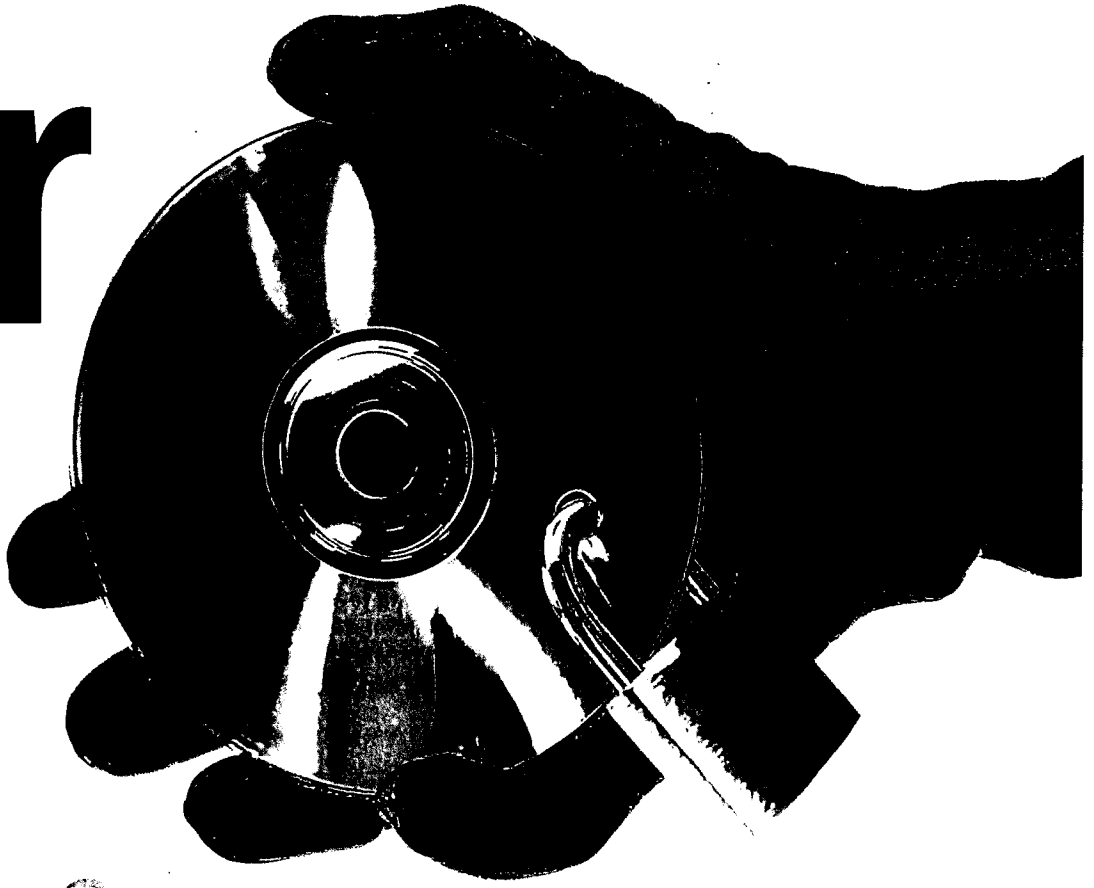
What Townships Can Do
To **Secure** Their Computers

How Safe is

Data?



Your

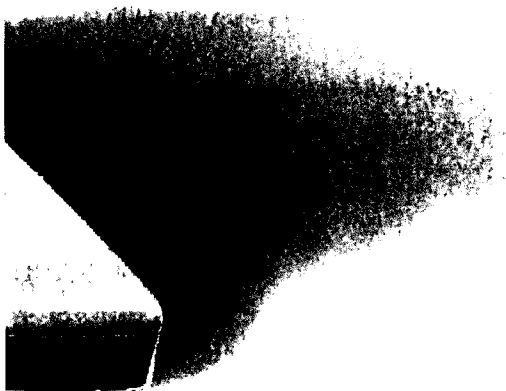


Simple Steps Can Help **Protect Your Township** from **Computer Crime**

BY JENNIFER L. HAWBAKER / ASSISTANT EDITOR

E-MAIL. ONLINE BANKING. LAPTOP COMPUTERS.

The very things that make the workday easier can also open townships up to a whole new world of crime. The good news, as Benjamin Franklin proclaimed, is that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Townships, whether they have one computer or 100, can take plenty of steps to make sure their information systems — and processes — are safe and secure.



COMPUTER SECURITY

\$ 102,000.

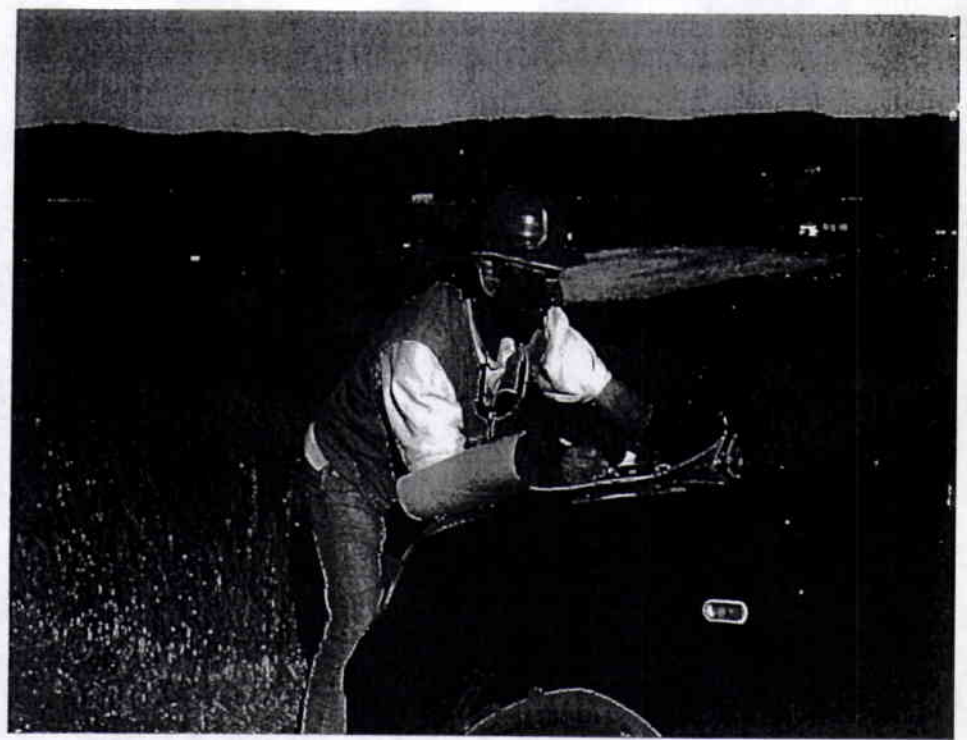
That's how much Monroe Township in Cumberland County lost to cyber-thieves last October when they hacked into the township's bank account. The damage could have been worse, but the bank was able to recover a reported \$36,000.

"We had a phone call from a bank in another state saying they were receiving a deposit that looked odd," secretary-treasurer Marge Metzger says. "We contacted our bank and froze all of our accounts, then we notified the State Police, and then the FBI got involved."

Monroe Township is far from alone. The headlines are filled with news of computer crimes against individuals, government offices, and even huge corporations. Just a month before the township's theft, in fact, the Cumberland County Redevelopment Authority lost more than \$479,000 to hackers. *(More than \$109,000 of that had been recovered when the News went to press.)*

In that case, the crooks used a computer virus to record staff's computer keystrokes. They learned the authority's bank access code, broke into the account, and directed staff to a phony Web site that said the online banking system was temporarily unavailable due to maintenance.

"That's the really intelligent piece of that theft," says Bryan Gembusia, a supervisor for South Middleton township in Cumberland



Protecting township data requires more than setting up a secure Internet connection. Information can also be lost or stolen when employees take laptops out of the office to work off-site. Developing written policies and providing regular security training can help prevent such problems.

County and a computer consultant. "Having that fake Web site gave the bad guys time to make the transfers before anyone knew what was happening."

In Monroe Township, however, Metzger says no one can yet confirm how the hackers broke into the bank account there.

"It's hard to take the proper procedures to prevent it when you don't know where or how it occurred," Metzger says. "We're having a lot of discussions with the bank, and we have installed additional security software on our computers as an added protection."

The township has the right idea. Prevention, the experts say, is a critical component of computer security. Thwarting Internet crime is just one piece of the puzzle, though. There's a

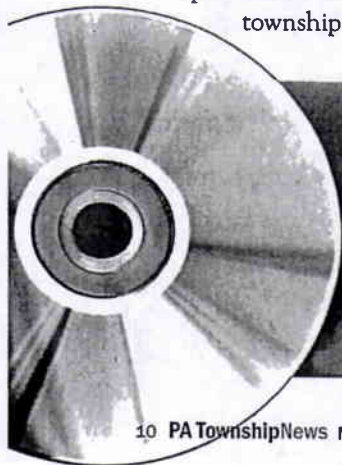
lot more to consider when it comes to keeping electronic data safe.

Increasing awareness

In 2008, researchers from Penn State Altoona set out to assess the security of information systems and processes in municipalities statewide. Their focus was on rural Pennsylvania, but they also collected data from urban and suburban areas for comparison.

"Before the project, people didn't know exactly what municipalities were doing right or wrong," says Jungwoo Ryoo, Ph.D., one of the researchers and an assistant professor of information sciences and technology. "This pinpointed both strengths and weaknesses."

The researchers looked at three areas critical to computer security: infrastructure, computer literacy, and daily



CAUTION CAUTION

practices. Their findings appear in a report published last year through The Center for Rural Pennsylvania (see box on Page 18), and some are not surprising. For instance, budget, manpower, and a lack of knowledge can all contribute to less-than-optimum security levels.

"A lot of times, people have *computer* literacy but not *security* literacy," Ryoo says. "You can buy the technology to secure the system, but if people aren't using the technology correctly, it's almost good for nothing."

The report does more than detail security problems, however. It also suggests some simple — and even no-cost — solutions for both local and state government.

"Hopefully, people can learn from our report and make some improvements," says Charlotte McConn, M.S., another of the report's authors. "Right now, there's a lack of awareness of the need for security. Part of what we want to accomplish is educational, and part of it is policy making — increased awareness in the legislature so they can consider funding for security."

Some of the steps township officials can take, the researchers say, include pooling resources to share information technology staff who have security expertise; training staff on security awareness; and developing written policies to enforce sound, daily security practices.

They say that other levels of government can also be part of the solution by providing training, developing a centralized incident management system to track security breaches, and developing a Web site that promotes the exchange of ideas and best practices on IT security in local government.

The researchers hope this survey is just the first of many.

"I think an ideal situation would be

making this a periodic assessment of the different municipalities so we know the progress they're making," Ryoo says. "That's important because this is an area where things are changing all the time."

Tips for staying safe

Is it really worth the time and money it takes to keep up with the moving target of computer security? The answer, from township officials and computer experts alike, is an unequivocal "yes." The consequences of doing nothing range from minor work interruptions to identity theft and high-cost crimes. Here are some examples:

- Computers may be slow or unresponsive, display programs or messages that you haven't seen before, or suddenly run out of disk space or memory. These could be signs of a computer virus or malicious software running in the background.

- Private information about residents, employees, or the township may be stolen, including Social Security numbers, personnel and medical information, and bank account details. Thieves may access the information by hacking into the computer system or stealing a laptop or flash drive (*the floppy disk of the 21st century*) that an employee takes out of the office.

- The township's Web site could be disabled, preventing residents and businesses from finding the information they need.

- Hackers could use your township computer to break into or infect other computers.

The good news is that townships can do plenty to get up to speed on IT security issues and make sure technology is a help, not a hindrance. Turn the page for some tips from the experts interviewed for this article. ➤

PSATS CONFERENCE WORKSHOP

Are your township's computerized records secure?

Learn how to increase the computer security in your township at this important workshop, offered in conjunction with PSATS' 88th Annual Educational Conference and Trade Show. The presenters will also discuss their recent research on the state of computer security in Pennsylvania's rural municipalities.

Safety First: How to Better Secure Your Township Records

Date and time:

Monday, April 19, 2:45 - 4 p.m.

Location:

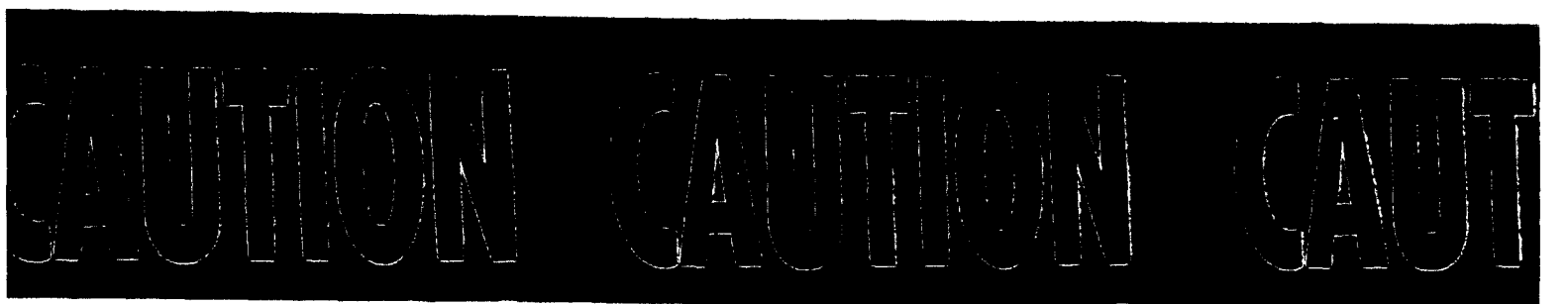
Hershey Lodge, Hershey, Pa.

Speakers:

- Jungwoo Ryoo, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Penn State Altoona
- Charlotte E. McConn, M.S., Instructor, Penn State Altoona

Cost:

The workshop is free to anyone registered to attend the conference. For more information, call PSATS at (717) 763-0930 or log onto www.psats.org to register for the conference.



COMPUTER SECURITY

1) Hire a reputable computer consultant or vendor to do a security audit for the township.

If they do the job right, they will think like a criminal and act like a criminal to make sure all the right defenses are in place. They will figure out what data is accessible internally from a township computer and externally over the Internet. They may even call the office, posing as a bank employee, and

ask for a user name and password, says Tim Grattan, information technology director for the Borough of State College and the Regional Technology Program, a group of six municipal entities that share IT resources. He speaks from experience.

"We feel pretty confident about our work, but we wanted to have someone come in and find holes so we could fix them," Grattan says. "They exposed a number of vulnerabilities, areas that we needed to clean up, and we did that."

The price of an audit depends, of course, on the size of the job, but South Middleton Township's Bryan Gembusia advises local government officials to con-

sider more than just the initial expense.

"It might cost \$5,000, but if a thief can get into one of the township's computers, he could steal \$200,000," Gembusia says. "It's almost like an insurance policy."

2) Install a computer firewall and antivirus software and update the software regularly.

The firewall blocks outsiders from accessing your computer, and everything on it, through an Internet connection, but it has to be configured properly. "If you install it and tell it to let everything through, it's like not having a firewall at all," Gembusia says. "If it's tough enough, however, somebody trying to get in will realize it's too much work and move on."

The antivirus software prevents, detects, and removes a host of bad things from your computer that could compromise data on that machine and on the entire network.

The software won't be much use, however, if you don't update it frequently. Just as the flu virus changes from year to year, computer viruses change, too, and new ones are appearing all the time. Chances are that your software vendor provides free automatic updates to ward off the latest threats.

"A lot of places don't keep their antivirus software updated," Grattan says. "Set it to get those automatic updates; sometimes they come out two or three times a week."

3) Update all software when prompted.

Most other software on the market today will also download regular updates to your computer over the Internet. It takes just a few minutes, costs nothing, and can help protect your information from hackers.

"When vulnerabilities in a program are discovered by criminals, people like Microsoft® are quick to figure out how to close that door," Grattan says. "They come out with a software update that shows up automatically on your computer."

4) Require passwords for computer access.

This is a simple, no-cost, but effective security precaution, Ryoo says. Township employees should have to create strong passwords — one with letters and numbers — and update them

"If you don't know what resources are available, and if you don't know that you're doing something wrong, that's when you're the most vulnerable."

Pennsylvania State Data Center

PaSDC

Penn State Harrisburg

Census 2010 is Here!

The 2010 Census is Easy, Important, and Safe

EASY
The shortest, simplest Census form in modern history. Just 10 basic questions. Takes less than 10 minutes.

IMPORTANT
The Federal Government distributes more than \$400 Billion every year to local government based on Census Counts: every form brings vital resources to communities.

SAFE
Everything on a Census Questionnaire is confidential! The Census Bureau, by law cannot share any of your personal information.



The Pennsylvania State Data Center is your local Census expert. Contact us if you have any questions about the Census:

www.PaCensus2010.org

Or call: 717.948.6336

The Commonwealth's Official Source for Population and Economic Statistics

frequently. "Cracking those simple passwords takes no time," he says. "A password should not be something that could be easily guessed."

Grattan says that passwords should also never be shared. If you will be out of the office and want a coworker to check your e-mail, for example, he says the answer is *not* to share your computer password. Instead, set your e-mail account to forward your messages to that person in your absence.

5) Secure any wireless networks.

If the township is using a wireless network that's not secure, anyone in the area with a computer and the know-how can access your data. Check the setup instructions for your wireless router to learn how to limit access to the network or have a professional do it for you.

"I can open my laptop in almost any neighborhood in town and see who's got a wireless network," Grattan says. "Anyone with bad intentions can maneuver through that. It's like leaving all your windows open before you go to bed. You don't want to do that. Lock up."

Electronic records are subject to retention policies

DATABASES, WORD-PROCESSING FILES, SPREADSHEETS, AND E-MAIL are an intrinsic part of life for many township officials and staff. As with paper records, however, these electronic files must be managed in accordance with Pennsylvania's records retention and disposition schedules, policies, and guidelines.

To make sure your township is in compliance, view the applicable policies at www.phmc.state.pa.us. Click on "Records Management" at the top of the page, then "Local Government/Judicial System Services," and then "Electronic Records" on the left side of the page.

Townships may also contact Sue Hartman at (717) 787-3939 or ra-statearchives@state.pa.us.

6) Back up your files regularly.

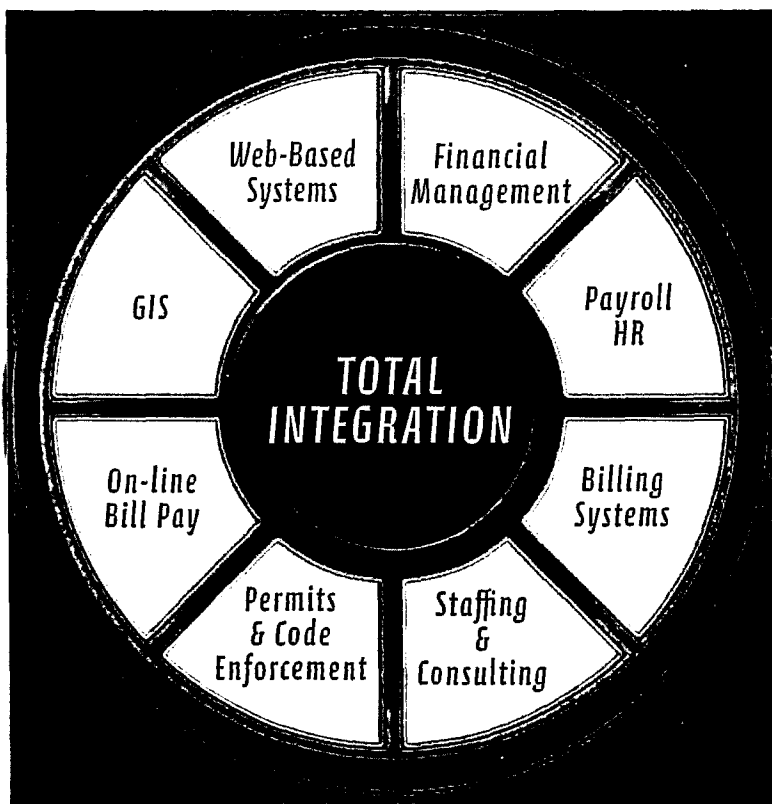
In its "Local Government Cyber Security" guide, the Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center recommends doing incremental data backups daily. Full backups should be done weekly, it says, and then stored off-site.

Matt Dallas, president of the municipal software company Dallas Data

Systems in Pottstown, suggests a more aggressive plan. "We would recommend daily backups to some type of external device," he says, "but townships should consult with their information technology provider."

7) Develop a written procedure for disposing of and destroying old equipment — and follow it.

Hard drives, storage disks, flash



"Great things are not done by impulse, but by a series of small things brought together."

Vincent Van Gogh

DALLAS DATA SYSTEMS, Inc.
Systems from People Who Know Government

www.dallasdatasystems.com
 Pottstown, PA 19464
 P: 610.970.7050