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AUDITOR GENERAL FINDS CONCERNS IN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES' HANDLING OF PERSONAL INFORMATION

The Auditor General's two-part Information Systems Audit Report, tabled in Parliament today, gives a wake-up call to all government agencies that handle personal and sensitive information.

In the IS Compliance Audit section of the report, Auditor General Colin Murphy examined five agencies to see whether the controls in place were sufficient to protect personal and sensitive information. The examination revealed fundamental weaknesses in all of the key areas of information security examined.

Specifically Mr Murphy found:

- Four of the five agencies had a wide range of confidential documents and files saved to unsecured folders on network servers, enabling thousands of sensitive files and documents relating to members of the WA public to be viewed by anyone connected to the network.

- Computer network security was poor and there were fundamental weaknesses in the security controls for computer applications and databases.

- None of the agencies had adequate controls over the transfer of personal and sensitive information to portable USB devices such as thumb drives which can be easily lost or stolen.

- Three out of the five agencies lacked IT security policies.

- None of the agencies consistently applied simple administrative controls such as police checks or confidentiality agreements for staff dealing with personal or sensitive information.

Mr Murphy did not publicly name the agencies in order to minimise the risk that they might be targeted to exploit the reported weaknesses. His concern about the report's findings had prompted him to seek assurance from the agencies that recommendations contained in the report will be implemented.

The results of the General Computer and Application Controls Audits section of the report served to reinforce his concerns that: many agencies are continuing to ignore the importance of effectively managing their information systems.

For general computer controls, Mr Murphy's office reviewed 65 agencies and benchmarked 41 against accepted good practice for IS management. Nearly 60 per cent of agencies failed to meet the benchmark.

His audit of five key business applications found weaknesses in security and data processing controls that could potentially impact delivery of key services to the public.

"By failing to address fundamental control weaknesses, agencies leave themselves vulnerable to computer system failures, unauthorised access to information, loss of information and fraudulent activity," Mr Murphy said.

He pointed out that cost of managing information was not an excuse.

"Many of the controls required to ensure appropriate and secure management of an organisation's computer systems do not require expensive technology or large numbers of specialist resources. Good controls can be achieved through the appropriate implementation and management of basic policies, procedures and practice.

"I expect agencies across government to take note of the findings and recommendations of this report."

The reports can be downloaded from: http://www.audit.wa.gov.au/media/index.html

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