



Public Works Projects for the Internet

October 3, 2008

The Honorable Lee H. Rosenthal
Chair, Committee on Rules of Practice and Procedure
Judicial Conference of the United States
Washington, D.C. 20544

Dear Judge Rosenthal:

I would like to thank you for your letter of July 16, 2008 on the subject of personal identifiers in appellate opinions. Your kind words are very much appreciated and I am pleased to report that the Clerks of the Courts of the Second, Fifth, and Ninth Circuits wrote to me indicating they were in the process of redacting social security numbers.

One issue in regards to appellate opinions that I would like to bring to your attention is the status of Alien Identification Numbers. It is the position of the Clerks of the Courts that Alien Identification Numbers do not fall within the enumerated list of "individuals' Social Security and taxpayer identification numbers, names of minor children, financial account numbers, dates of birth, and, in criminal cases, home addresses." I do understand that a literal reading of the list might preclude Alien Identification Numbers and thus bring it to your attention in case the issue had not been previously considered.

I am also writing to you today to report on preliminary results of an audit of documents submitted to the United States District Courts. A social security number scan of these documents shows approximately 2,282 suspect documents in 32 different districts. The social security numbers are present in documents filed in earlier years, but also in many documents filed in 2008. In some cases, it appears that the social security numbers for attorneys and state employees are being disclosed.

While most documents contain the social security number for a single individual, we have found lists of dozens of individuals. In some cases, the name, date of birth, social security number, and even financial account numbers are present, making this "one-stop shopping" for potential identity theft.

I have enclosed for your reference a DVD of the 2,282 suspect documents. You will find attached to this letter as Appendix A a detailed analysis of 13 of the District Courts based a systematic manual scan of the documents flagged by our program. We will be completing the same detailed analysis of the remaining 19 districts for which we have data, and would be happy to forward that information to you if you wish.

It is worth mentioning that the number of privacy incidents varies widely by district. For example, we were unable to find any social security numbers for the Southern District of Texas or the District of Oregon, and the District of Minnesota had only 6 cases with problems, all from 2005 and 2006.

After working with government data for two decades, I am always impressed by the impact the Internet has on the dissemination of public data. The process of learning how to disseminate public databases effectively is one of trial and error and of progressively perfecting the process. The rules and procedures to protect personal identifiers developed by the Committee on Rules of Practice and Procedure are, I believe, a very important step in this regard.

Based on our experience with scanning District Court documents, I hope you will permit me to offer three suggestions that might provide additional support to the goal of broad dissemination of public information while protecting the privacy of individuals.

First, there is no obvious way for a member of the public or a nonprofit research group such as ours to alert the Administrative Office of the Courts to privacy issues. No system is perfect, and the feedback from users of the system is an essential step in finding mistakes before they spread. Many organizations have found that appointing a Chief Privacy Officer provides a single point of contact for the public.

Second, when problems are found, there does not appear to be a systematic way of alerting the providers of legal information. Even though the social security numbers from appellate opinions were removed from court web sites, they are still present on West Law and Lexis Nexis. A notification mechanism when cases are withdrawn or changed would be extremely useful. Such a system should go beyond the commercial services to include the large number of nonprofit groups that disseminate the law. Our own computers at Public.Resource.Org, for example, serve 1 million unique visitors per month, and that number is far larger when we include other sites that copy our data.

Third, while the first line of defense for protection of privacy is with the lawyers who file documents in the PACER system, we must assume that no system is perfect. I have attached as Appendix B a simple one-line PERL program based on open source tools which we use to scan for social security numbers. We scan a database for potential hits and then look at each case manually. If we find a social security number, we use redaction tools to remove that information.

There are no doubt far more sophisticated tools available, but I offer this simple mechanism as an example and would be more than happy to discuss these tools with technical staff if that is useful.

Thank you again for your responsiveness and quick action on the matter of Appellate decisions. It is gratifying to see the commitment towards the protection of personal privacy, both in the Judicial Conference and in the day-to-day operations of the Clerks of the Court.

Very truly yours,

Carl Malamud
President & CEO
Public.Resource.Org

cc: Mr. Peter McCabe, Esq.
The Honorable James C. Duff

Appendix A, Page 1 of 20

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
District Court of Alabama						
		33-11	Page 2 of 3	2/1/2008	1	
		29-4	Page 2 of 21	3/5/2008	2	
		29-3	Page 2 of 28	3/5/2008	2	
		20-5	Page 19 of 24	7/25/2007	1	
		57-9	Page 4 of 28	3/4/2008	1	
		57-8	Page 39 of 43	3/4/2008	1	
		57-6	Page 5 of 34	3/4/2008	3	
		57-5	Page 21 of 39	3/4/2008	2	
		57-16	Page 10 of 20	3/4/2008	2	
		3	Page 3 of 12	3/28/2008	1	
		1	Page 2 of 4	12/6/2007	3	
		6	Page 3 of 10	7/11/2007	9	
		51-2	Page 3 of 15	10/2/2006	2	
		52-2	Page 3 of 15	10/3/2006	2	
		21-2	Page 3 of 13	7/21/2006	1	
		24	Page 14 of 15	7/31/2007	1	
		38-2	Page 4 of 38	11/15/2007	2	
		26	Page 11 of 12	8/15/2007	1	
		31	Page 3 of 3	10/3/2007	1	
		22-2	Page 3 of 45	1/14/2008	2	
		7	Page 1 of 7	1/17/2008	2	
		83-11	Page 1 of 1	11/15/2007	1	
		49-2	Page 2 of 53	4/18/2007	3	
		2	Page 3 of 3	1/28/2008	1	
		2	Page 1 of 9	5/1/2007	1	
		1	Page 1 of 9	4/30/2007	1	
		52-2	Page 5 of 5	4/10/2008	1	
		20-2	Page 5 of 36	2/25/2008	8	
		37-5	Page 2 of 21	6/26/2008	1	
		53-7	Page 2 of 3	8/30/2007	1	
		39	Page 5 of 28	11/16/2007	2	
		4	Page 1 of 1	12/27/2007	1	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		42-2	Page 8 of 16	8/19/2008	4	
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		22-6	Page 2 of 17	2/8/2008	1	
		9	Page 2 of 4	1/30/2008	1	
		22-9	Page 1 of 2	4/25/2008	1	
		6-2	Page 36 of 45	8/22/2005	1	
		3	Page 3 of 11	2/8/2008	1	
		56	Page 1 of 4	4/22/1994	1	
		101-2	Page 5 of 7	8/21/2008	2	
		98	Page 12 of 12	5/28/2008	1	
		30-15	Page 14 of 20	2/28/2007	1	
		129-2	Page 2 of 33	11/3/2006	2	
		39-2	Page 27 of 48	1/4/2008	1	
		14	Page 1 of 2	10/3/2006	1	
		48-9	Page 1 of 3	2/1/2008	2	
		11-2	Page 1 of 13	12/5/2005	2	
		1	Page 3 of 4	1/23/2008	3	
		19-18	Page 3 of 20	10/26/2006	15	
		19-16	Page 3 of 19	10/26/2006	10	
		19-17	Page 8 of 26	10/26/2006	15	
		19-6	Page 3 of 22	10/26/2006	1	
		19-14	Page 11 of 14	10/26/2006	2	
		19-20	Page 2 of 11	10/26/2006	1	
		14	Page 1 of 3	8/20/2007	1	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		1	Page 20 of 47	1/2/2008	7	
		8	Page 1 of 1	1/2/2008	1	
		58-12	Page 4 of 10	4/30/2008	1	
		41	Page 1 of 3	2/1/2008	1	
		498-2	Page 3 of 14	2/28/2008	1	
		20-11	Page 10 of 34	2/23/2007	2	
		15	Page 1 of 1	7/24/2008	1	
		14	Page 1 of 1	7/24/2008	1	
		54-2	Page 4 of 17	10/19/2007	2	
		7	Page 1 of 2	4/10/2006	1	
		16-2	Page 19 of 53	11/1/2007	2	
		16-2	Page 3 of 9	4/18/2008	2	
		10	Page 1 of 6	3/5/2008	1	
		36	Page 2 of 8	10/19/2006	1	
		1	Page 1 of 9	10/29/2007	2	
		1	Page 1 of 17	4/16/2007	2	
		30-16	Page 20 of 29	6/11/2008	2	
		22-11	Page 73 of 84	5/12/2008	2	
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		13-3	Page 6 of 23	2/19/2008	1	
		2	Page 1 of 33	6/2/2006	1	
		14	Page 1 of 6	8/3/2006	1	
		52-11	Page 40 of 56	11/21/2007	1	
		28-2	Page 1 of 7	12/6/2007	2	
		30-2	Page 1 of 17	12/20/2007	4	
		32-4	Page 2 of 30	8/24/2007	1	
		7	Page 2 of 3	2/15/2006	1	
		20-6	Page 4 of 20	1/18/2008	9	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		33-2	Page 1 of 63	9/6/2007	25	
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		28-5	Page 1 of 1	3/5/2008	1	
		25	Page 2 of 3	9/6/2007	1	
		26	Page 2 of 13	9/6/2007	2	
		55	Page 3 of 19	12/11/2007	2	
		1	Page 1 of 2	4/2/2008	1	
		39-21	Page 1 of 2	4/7/2008	2	
		18-3	Page 2 of 2	1/29/2007	1	
		18-11	Page 1 of 2	5/30/2008	4	
		1	Page 1 of 14	8/16/2007	2	
		4	Page 3 of 10	7/5/2007	1	
		9	Page 7 of 8	11/14/2006	1	
		52-7	Page 4 of 11	5/15/2008	10	
		5	Page 8 of 10	11/13/2007	1	
		11	Page 3 of 5	1/25/2008	1	
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		9	Page 2 of 6	11/9/2007	1	
		16-6	Page 1 of 1	2/6/2006	1	
		82	Page 2 of 10	2/6/2006	1	
		72-91	Page 13 of 32	11/16/2007	3	
		72-51	Page 1 of 11	11/16/2007	1	
		72-2	Page 7 of 50	11/16/2007	1	
		72-34	Page 1 of 1	11/16/2007	1	
		72-48	Page 1 of 4	11/16/2007	1	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		85-7	Page 14 of 181	12/13/2007	1	
		85-25	Page 4 of 7	12/13/2007	1	
		72-66	Page 1 of 2	11/16/2007	1	
		72-122	Page 20 of 86	11/16/2007	1	
		72-39	Page 4 of 50	11/16/2007	1	
		85-5	Page 8 of 202	12/13/2007	1	
		28	Page 4 of 6	8/15/2008	1	
		1	Page 46 of 61	3/3/2008	2	
		29-2	Page 1 of 2	7/20/2006	1	
		114-2	Page 13 of 220	12/15/2006	3	
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		25	Page 1 of 2	10/3/2006	1	
		93-2	Page 9 of 83	7/28/2008	4	
		21	Page 6 of 7	4/18/2008	2	
		1	Page 5 of 7	11/27/2007	1	
		10	Page 5 of 5	1/25/2008	1	
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		63	Page 24 of 100	7/21/2008	1	
		46	Page 47 of 151	7/21/2008	2	
		48	Page 50 of 149	7/21/2008	1	
		57	Page 118 of 250	7/21/2008	1	
		54	Page 179 of 201	7/21/2008	2	
		55	Page 4 of 200	7/21/2008	2	
		52	Page 51 of 200	7/21/2008	1	
		29-2	Page 1 of 2	4/27/2007	1	
		3	Page 5 of 12	2/8/2008	4	
		1	Page 1 of 8	10/4/2006	1	
		19	Page 2 of 7	11/14/2006	1	
		4-3	Page 1 of 7	4/25/2006	1	
		47-2	Page 2 of 2	5/5/2008	2	
		58-2	Page 5 of 23	6/11/2008	1	
		29-2	Page 5 of 21	12/28/2007	1	
		45-30	Page 1 of 1	4/19/2007	1	

Appendix A, Page 6 of 20

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		45-29	Page 1 of 4	4/19/2007	1	
		45-2	Page 2 of 53	4/19/2007	1	
		39-2	Page 1 of 6	12/28/2007	1	
		7	Page 1 of 20	8/30/2007	1	
		1	Page 1 of 15	7/27/2007	1	
		1	Page 16 of 23	1/2/2008	2	
		19	Page 2 of 2	3/2/2006	1	
		12	Page 2 of 4	2/23/2007	2	
		30-2	Page 297 of 618	1/18/2008	8	
		13	Page 2 of 3	1/16/2007	1	
		1	Page 3 of 4	1/23/2008	3	
		23-11	Page 1 of 3	8/15/2008	9	
		115-2	Page 18 of 85	5/7/2008	4	
		16-2	Page 23 of 79	4/17/2008	1	
		9	Page 30 of 59	11/20/2007	2	
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		27	Page 5 of 14	4/9/2008	1	
		23-6	Page 7 of 197	10/23/2007	3	
		58-2	Page 2 of 2	2/28/2008	1	
District Court of Alaska						
		126-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		35-2	Page 1 of 2	5/10/2006	1	
		35-2	Page 1 of 2	5/19/2006	1	
		3	Page 2 of 3	3/6/2006	1	
		46-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		127-2	Page 1 of 2	5/19/2006	1	
		38-2	Page 1 of 2	5/19/2006	1	
		422-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		42-2	Page 9 of 162	8/4/2006	1	
		65-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		44-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		146-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		43-2	Page 1 of 2	5/19/2006	1	
		38-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		77-2	Page 1 of 2	5/19/2006	1	
		105-2	Page 1 of 2	5/19/2006	1	
		99	Page 1 of 3	4/1/2008	1	
		99-2	Page 1 of 4	4/1/2008	1	
		71-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		86-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		529-2	Page 1 of 4	8/8/2008	1	
		529	Page 1 of 3	8/8/2008	1	
		160-2	Page 10 of 39	4/7/2008	3	
		78-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		59-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		268-2	Page 1 of 2	5/10/2006	1	
		39-9	Page 2 of 4	8/17/2006	1	
		41-9	Page 2 of 4	8/18/2006	1	
		18-2	Page 1 of 2	5/10/2006	1	
		3	Page 2 of 3	3/6/2006	1	
		52-2	Page 1 of 2	5/22/2006	1	
		51-2	Page 1 of 2	5/19/2006	1	
		421-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		155-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		38-2	Page 4 of 4	4/3/2006	3	
		67-5	Page 6 of 6	5/14/2007	1	
		91-2	Page 1 of 2	5/10/2006	1	
		147-2	Page 1 of 2	5/19/2006	1	
		37-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		34-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		13-2	Page 1 of 7	6/26/2006	1	
		140-12	Page 2 of 7	9/14/2007	1	
		27-2	Page 1 of 2	5/19/2006	1	
		24	Page 1 of 3	2/29/2008	1	
		18-2	Page 1 of 2	5/3/2006	1	
		24-2	Page 1 of 4	2/29/2008	1	
		129	Page 17 of 60	6/16/2006	2	
		135	Page 13 of 44	6/26/2006	2	
		11	Page 2 of 3	4/5/2006	2	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		19	Page 1 of 2	8/17/2006	1	
		38-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
		34	Page 1 of 3	3/11/2008	1	
		34-2	Page 1 of 4	3/11/2008	1	
		100-2	Page 1 of 4	4/1/2008	1	
		100	Page 1 of 3	4/1/2008	1	
		350-3	Page 1 of 2	2/1/2007	1	
		349-3	Page 1 of 2	2/1/2007	1	
		66-2	Page 1 of 2	5/2/2006	1	
District Court of Arizona						
		57-2	Page 12 of 12	9/7/2005	1	
		88-2	Page 4 of 6	8/5/2005	1	
		68	Page 12 of 16	9/20/2006	1	
		173-2	Page 22 of 36	3/3/2006	2	
		57-9	Page 1 of 1	6/5/2006	1	
		354-3	Page 3 of 91	8/8/2005	1	
		45	Page 2 of 11	11/14/2005	1	
		128	Page 2 of 10	10/7/2006	1	
		216	Page 53 of 132	6/27/2006	2	
		109	Page 2 of 7	7/19/2006	1	
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		28-9	Page 2 of 4	8/14/2006	1	
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		27-5	Page 1 of 5	8/14/2006	1	
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		27-3	Page 4 of 5	8/14/2006	6	
		261-3	Page 2 of 22	2/27/2007	5	
		199-6	Page 1 of 30	3/17/2006	9	
		195-6	Page 16 of 27	3/9/2006	2	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		199-9	Page 44 of 45	3/17/2006	2	
		195-4	Page 4 of 25	3/9/2006	1	
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		199-2	Page 5 of 36	3/17/2006	2	
		199-5	Page 6 of 40	3/17/2006	4	
		195-5	Page 10 of 26	3/9/2006	1	
		46	Page 1 of 4	4/11/2007	1	
		120-2	Page 25 of 284	4/26/2006	1	
		265	Page 1 of 4	6/6/2006	1	
		261	Page 1 of 4	4/19/2006	1	
District Court of the Northern District of California						
		38-4	Page 38 of 88	6/6/2008	3	
		46-7	Page 13 of 46	7/3/2008	3	
		37-4	Page 38 of 88	6/6/2008	3	
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		1-12	Page 56 of 57	6/19/2007	1	
		1-21	Page 36 of 50	6/19/2007	2	
		45	Page 9 of 24	3/14/2006	1	
		18	Page 18 of 43	12/6/2005	1	
		104	Page 1 of 2	5/27/2008	1	
		25-2	Page 1 of 2	8/8/2008	1	
		17-2	Page 1 of 5	8/21/2008	1	
		4	Page 36 of 47	8/17/2007	1	
		25-2	Page 7 of 11	7/21/2008	1	
		1	Page 43 of 43	5/7/2008	1	
		1	Page 2 of 2	7/23/2008	2	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		5-2	Page 2 of 32	11/30/2007	32	
		13-2	Page 118 of 145	8/15/2008	1	
		9	Page 36 of 46	8/7/2008	1	
		13	Page 36 of 46	8/8/2008	1	
		25	Page 36 of 46	9/4/2008	1	
		18	Page 36 of 46	8/15/2008	1	
		21-2	Page 3 of 19	4/3/2008	1	
		25	Page 9 of 32	10/26/2007	3	
		22-3	Page 41 of 49	12/6/2007	2	
		22-2	Page 28 of 63	12/6/2007	2	
		14-4	Page 13 of 41	11/8/2007	1	
District Court of the Southern District of Florida						
		37	Page 3 of 3	9/23/2005	1	
		708	Page 4 of 9	4/19/2005	1	
		13	Page 3 of 3	9/15/2005	1	
		336	Page 6 of 26	6/9/2006	1	
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		137	Page 16 of 39	10/20/2005	2	
		168	Page 6 of 16	5/1/2008	2	
		43	Page 1 of 6	11/29/2005	1	
District Court of the Northern District of Illinois						
		9	Page 2 of 7	9/5/2008	10	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
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		20-6	Page 3 of 9	6/4/2008	19	
		23	Page 8 of 15	6/3/2008	47	
		21-2	Page 8 of 15	5/14/2008	47	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		10	Page 3 of 9	6/25/2008	24	
		116	Page 14 of 21	8/19/2008	2	
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		1	Page 1 of 2	7/25/2008	1	
		3	Page 4 of 17	8/6/2007	1	
		8	Page 2 of 5	6/9/2008	2	
		28-4	Page 7 of 9	9/5/2008	1	
		15	Page 1 of 1	8/19/2008	2	
		21	Page 2 of 9	8/25/2008	1	
		23-2	Page 2 of 13	4/3/2008	1	
		8	Page 8 of 47	5/22/2008	1	
		44-2	Page 88 of 159	4/25/2008	1	
		13-7	Page 3 of 5	5/12/2008	13	
		7	Page 13 of 21	5/1/2008	2	
		1	Page 1 of 1	4/18/2008	1	
		1	Page 17 of 39	5/9/2008	3	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		10-2	Page 6 of 8	2/15/2008	2	
		1	Page 4 of 16	9/3/2008	1	
District Court of the Northern Mariana Islands						
		54	Page 7 of 7	10/18/2005	2	
		64	Page 4 of 15	12/12/2005	1	
		46	Page 7 of 7	9/13/2005	2	
		27	Page 1 of 6	3/22/2006	1	
		24	Page 1 of 6	11/25/2005	1	
		325	Page 4 of 10	9/8/2005	1	
		11	Page 1 of 2	8/18/2005	1	
		94	Page 5 of 8	8/16/2005	2	
		119-15	Page 16 of 16	12/21/2005	1	
		13	Page 1 of 2	8/18/2005	1	
		58	Page 1 of 2	8/18/2005	1	
		1	Page 1 of 4	11/8/2005	1	
		345	Page 4 of 14	11/7/2005	1	
		32-2	Page 3 of 4	9/30/2007	1	
		33	Page 1 of 7	6/29/2007	1	
		29	Page 1 of 7	6/21/2006	1	
		218-2	Page 11 of 39	7/10/2008	1	
		21	Page 1 of 2	8/10/2005	1	
		24	Page 1 of 10	8/10/2005	2	
		3-2	Page 11 of 39	7/10/2008	1	
		1-3	Page 19 of 29	4/17/2007	1	
		19	Page 2 of 3	5/19/2006	1	
		11	Page 1 of 2	8/18/2005	1	
		9-2	Page 4 of 4	9/7/2007	1	
		24-4	Page 21 of 25	1/3/2006	1	
		25-8	Page 12 of 13	4/3/2006	1	
		14	Page 1 of 2	2/22/2005	1	
		16	Page 1 of 1	8/24/2005	1	
		1	Page 1 of 1	7/20/2007	1	
		16	Page 9 of 16	12/29/2005	1	
		27-2	Page 4 of 4	5/15/2006	1	
		1	Page 13 of 19	11/30/2005	1	
		4	Page 17 of 18	1/31/2006	1	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		1	Page 1 of 3	10/31/2005	1	
District Court of Massachusetts						
			Page 13 of 45	7/28/2006	1	
			Page 7 of 22	7/21/2006	1	
			Page 1 of 2	8/11/2006	1	
			Page 3 of 52	1/10/2007	2	
			Page 12 of 24	11/18/2005	1	
			Page 1 of 4	8/7/2006	1	
			Page 1 of 1	6/22/2006	1	
			Page 1 of 1	6/22/2006	1	
			Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
			Page 6 of 11	10/14/2005	5	
			Page 7 of 24	9/22/2006	2	
			Page 5 of 5	5/18/2004	1	
			Page 4 of 21	2/3/2006	1	
			Page 1 of 54	6/10/2008	67	
			Page 6 of 18	12/22/2006	1	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		1175-22	Page 6 of 18	3/14/2008	1	
		11-4	Page 1 of 6	11/2/2005	1	
		22-2	Page 3 of 29	12/21/2005	1	
		22-3	Page 2 of 20	12/21/2005	1	
		59-2	Page 1 of 6	10/5/2006	1	
		284	Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
		86	Page 1 of 3	5/16/2007	2	
		37-3	Page 2 of 11	1/4/2007	1	
		32-6	Page 2 of 6	11/8/2006	5	
		37-5	Page 3 of 17	1/4/2007	10	
		32-3	Page 8 of 12	11/8/2006	4	
		226	Page 4 of 4	3/2/2008	5	
		88-2	Page 6 of 14	4/10/2007	1	
		243-2	Page 2 of 2	3/28/2008	1	
		240	Page 4 of 4	3/21/2008	1	
		179-3	Page 3 of 7	1/28/2008	1	
		184-3	Page 2 of 5	1/28/2008	25	
		184-2	Page 1 of 4	1/28/2008	25	
		121-4	Page 4 of 5	1/23/2008	1	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		43-5	Page 7 of 14	11/27/2006	1	
		18-2	Page 1 of 1	5/26/2005	1	
		18	Page 1 of 2	5/26/2005	1	
		284	Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
		19-5	Page 7 of 27	11/9/2005	1	
		284	Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
		61-2	Page 10 of 48	8/10/2007	2	
		59-4	Page 1 of 6	5/1/2006	1	
		46-3	Page 3 of 4	2/21/2006	2	
		284	Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
		10-2	Page 1 of 1	5/13/2005	1	
		45-14	Page 1 of 1	8/1/2006	1	
		36-13	Page 3 of 7	7/15/2005	2	
		36-6	Page 37 of 39	7/15/2005	3	
		36-5	Page 39 of 45	7/15/2005	1	
		54	Page 2 of 4	5/20/2005	1	
		37-16	Page 3 of 11	6/20/2007	1	
		26	Page 1 of 1	4/14/2006	1	
		118-2	Page 26 of 60	5/2/2008	1	
		20-3	Page 3 of 5	9/18/2006	3	
		82	Page 6 of 20	7/5/2006	1	
		188-3	Page 26 of 29	12/26/2007	1	
		20-3	Page 1 of 2	6/14/2006	2	
		284	Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
		284	Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
		13-3	Page 1 of 1	7/10/2006	1	
		73	Page 4 of 4	5/20/2008	4	
		6	Page 23 of 50	3/2/2005	1	
		284	Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
		19-8	Page 2 of 2	6/10/2004	1	
		54-2	Page 9 of 24	6/15/2006	1	
		100	Page 14 of 27	10/12/2006	2	
		12	Page 2 of 3	4/26/2006	1	
		3	Page 7 of 17	10/9/2005	1	
		38-2	Page 2 of 5	7/5/2007	1	
		44-2	Page 10 of 11	3/17/2005	2	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		41	Page 2 of 3	10/31/2005	1	
		44	Page 2 of 3	11/4/2005	1	
		39	Page 2 of 3	10/26/2005	1	
		37-2	Page 2 of 5	2/12/2007	7	
		31-3	Page 2 of 17	3/1/2007	1	
		31-4	Page 9 of 13	3/1/2007	5	
		27-2	Page 2 of 9	3/1/2007	1	
		25-7	Page 1 of 9	6/3/2005	2	
		29-3	Page 1 of 1	1/18/2006	1	
		20-4	Page 1 of 1	9/8/2005	1	
		17-4	Page 2 of 4	5/26/2004	1	
		12	Page 1 of 1	11/17/2004	1	
		37-8	Page 3 of 12	10/13/2005	2	
		29-5	Page 5 of 21	2/14/2006	2	
		33-3	Page 5 of 21	2/27/2006	2	
		71-3	Page 22 of 25	2/1/2007	3	
		14-3	Page 137 of 147	9/4/2006	1	
		27-2	Page 7 of 106	2/10/2006	1	
		28-2	Page 7 of 106	2/10/2006	1	
		58	Page 1 of 2	5/18/2006	1	
		9-3	Page 1 of 1	5/12/2005	1	
		284	Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
		56-3	Page 4 of 66	8/1/2007	2	
		12-2	Page 1 of 1	9/29/2004	1	
		284	Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
		20	Page 3 of 9	10/14/2005	5	
		231	Page 24 of 56	2/15/2008	1	
		194-5	Page 1 of 2	3/22/2007	1	
		194-2	Page 1 of 1	3/22/2007	1	
		194-3	Page 1 of 1	3/22/2007	1	
		194-4	Page 1 of 1	3/22/2007	1	
		58-2	Page 9 of 16	8/10/2006	2	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
		58-3	Page 4 of 41	8/10/2006	9	
		284	Page 6 of 21	9/22/2006	1	
		17	Page 1 of 4	2/10/2005	1	
		17-2	Page 1 of 1	2/10/2005	1	
		27	Page 2 of 11	11/10/2004	1	
District Court of Minnesota						
		61	Page 5 of 9	8/25/2005	3	
		137-2	Page 8 of 32	3/3/2006	2	
		8-3	Page 6 of 145	1/31/2008	1	
		41	Page 6 of 10	3/4/2005	1	
		4097-3	Page 1 of 31	4/17/2006	1	
		41	Page 6 of 10	3/4/2005	2	
District Court of Oregon						
No Problems Found						
District Court of the Western District of Pennsylvania						
		75	Page 2 of 3	10/12/2006	1	
		52-2	Page 1 of 3	10/18/2006	1	
		57	Page 9 of 24	10/26/2006	1	
		27-2	Page 11 of 17	10/2/2006	2	
		26-2	Page 8 of 8	9/1/2006	5	
		17	Page 11 of 17	9/1/2006	2	
		18	Page 7 of 17	3/31/2006	2	
		18	Page 7 of 17	3/31/2006	2	
		18	Page 7 of 17	3/31/2006	2	
		22	Page 1 of 3	3/10/2006	1	
		19	Page 7 of 17	3/31/2006	2	
		79	Page 1 of 2	6/19/2008	1	
		20-4	Page 2 of 15	5/4/2006	1	
		16-6	Page 1 of 4	2/6/2008	2	
		16-10	Page 1 of 2	2/6/2008	2	
		16-9	Page 1 of 2	2/6/2008	1	

File	Case ID	Doc #	Page Number	Date Filed	# of SSNs	SSNs Found
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	22	Page 7 of 17	3/31/2006	2	[REDACTED]
		18	Page 7 of 17	3/31/2006	2	
		37-12	Page 14 of 46	12/29/2005	17	
		37-8	Page 8 of 50	12/29/2005	1	
		21-3	Page 1 of 18	8/31/2006	1	
		3	Page 31 of 41	8/11/2008	3	
District Court of the Southern District of Texas						
No Problems Found						
District Court of Vermont						
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	145-2	Page 1 of 5	7/7/2008	1	[REDACTED]
		366-9	Page 41 of 68	4/6/2007	1	
		275-6	Page 41 of 68	3/8/2007	1	
		381-9	Page 41 of 68	4/25/2007	1	
		1	Page 46 of 96	8/27/2008	4	

Appendix B - Simple Social Security Scanner for PDF Files

```
#!/usr/bin/perl

# Note: This program is open source.  No restrictions on reuse.
# This program assumes PDF files with OCRd text.

# Regexp::Common is an open source toolkit available on Search.CPAN.Org.
use Regexp::Common qw /SEN/;
use File::Find;

# get args
my @files ;

# pdftotext is part of the open source XPDF toolkit.
# available from http://www.foolabs.com/xpdf/
my $pdftotext = "/opt/csw/bin/pdftotext" ;

if ( $ARGV[0] eq "" ) { print "usage: $0 [dir]\n" ; exit ; }

# use the "wanted" subroutine to filter out non-pdf files.
find(\&wanted, @ARGV) ;

foreach (@files) {
    my $filename = $_ ;
    my $counthits = 0 ;

    # pdftotext generates too many minor error messages, so we discard them.
    open STDERR, '>/dev/null' or die "Can't write to /dev/null: $!";
    open ( SCANME, "$pdftotext -layout $filename - |" ) ;

    while (<SCANME>) {

        while ( /$RE{SEN}{USA}{SSN}{-sep => '[\255\-\-]'}{-keep}/g )
        {
            # check for 000-00
            if ( ($2 eq "000") && ($3 eq "00") ) { next ; }
            $counthits++ ;
            if ( $counthits == 1 ) { print "$filename: "; }
            print "$2-$3-$4 " ;
        }
    }

    # print total number found
    if ( $counthits > 0 ) { print "$filename: $counthits\n" ; }
}

sub wanted {
# only operate on pdf files
/\.[pP][dD][fF]$/ or return;
push ( @files , $File::Find::name ) ;
}
```