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By Jane Anderson

Ransomware experts agree: Bad actors are targeting the health care sector at an accelerated pace, and if an organization lacks safeguards, it is at high risk of a data breach.

Cybercriminals view every type of organization as a moneymaking opportunity, said Rebecca Herold, president of SIMBUS360 and CEO of The Privacy Professor. However, small and mid-sized organizations can be particularly fruitful targets for them because those smaller organizations—which include many covered entities (CEs) and business associates (BAs)—don't have dedicated positions for cybersecurity.

"Every CE and BA will be targeted at least once, but often many times," Herold told *RPP*. "CEs and BAs will get hit with ransomware from at least one of the attempts if they do not provide sufficient training and keep awareness high within their workforce. They will then end up paying if they do not have a sufficient backup and recovery plan in place." Herold added that "all these ransomware attacks have revealed that far too many organizations are woefully lacking in such preparedness."

Ransomware spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic, and has reached seemingly epidemic proportions within the health care industry. A sampling of recent incidents reveals a wide range of organizations affected, with varying impacts:

- **St. Joseph's/Candler, the largest hospital system in Savannah, Georgia, first detected a ransomware attack on June 17 that hobbled some systems**. Restoration efforts continued into the end of June, according to a statement from the hospital system on June 29: "St. Joseph's/Candler continues to make progress on our restoration efforts and has activated certain clinical systems. We have been and continue to admit and care for patients. We will continue to work methodically to restore remaining systems as quickly and safely as possible."[1]

- **Ransomware at a fertility treatment provider in Atlanta resulted in a data breach that exposed sensitive personal and medical information of around 38,000 patients, according to the organization**. Reproductive Biology Associates (RBA), which also co-founded MyEggBank, the largest network of donor egg banks in North America, said in its notice that the clinic first became aware of an incident on April 16.[2]

  The organization discovered that "a file server containing embryology data was encrypted and therefore inaccessible." According to the organization, "we quickly determined that this was the result of a ransomware attack and shut down the affected server, thus terminating the actor's access, within the same business day." RBA said the hacker "first gained access to our system on April 7, 2021 and subsequently to a server containing protected health information on April 10, 2021."

  During the investigation, RBA said, "access to the encrypted files was regained, and we obtained confirmation from the actor that all exposed data was deleted and is no longer in its possession." The fertility organization also said that "in an abundance of caution, we conducted supplemental web searches for the potential presence of the exposed information, and at this time are not aware of any resultant exposure." Full names, addresses, Social Security numbers, laboratory results and "information relating to the handling of human tissue" was exposed in the breach, the organization said.

- **An attack that a consultant said could be ransomware hit University Medical Center in Las Vegas in late June.**[3] The hacker group REvil began posting personal information online purportedly obtained in the cyberattack, including images of Nevada driver's licenses, passports and Social Security cards for around half a dozen alleged victims. Hackers sometimes post data online in an effort to push an entity to pay a ransom demand.

  After receiving an inquiry from the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, University Medical Center issued a statement confirming that cybercriminals in mid-June accessed a server used to store data. "This type of attack has become increasingly common in the health care industry, with hospitals across the world experiencing similar situations," the medical center said.

- **In the aftermath of a ransomware attack, Scripps Health of San Diego is facing multiple class-action lawsuits from plaintiffs who claim the five-hospital system's leaders were negligent in failing to secure patient data against an attack that occurred in May and forced the rescheduling of some services.**[4]

  The legal complaints allege Scripps should have been "on notice" about the potential risk due to similar incidents occurring in the health care industry. Scripps notified more than 147,000 people that their personal information was affected, although the health system said that there was no indication that the data had been used to commit fraud. The plaintiffs contend that they are at continuing risk of identity theft due to the breach.

'Country Under Attack' by Hackers

The Biden administration released a memo on June 2 urging corporate executives and business leaders to protect themselves against the threat of ransomware. "The number and size of ransomware incidents have increased significantly, and strengthening our nation's resilience from cyberattacks—both private and public sector—is a top priority of the President's," wrote Anne Neuberger, deputy assistant to the president and deputy national security advisor for cyber and emerging technology.[5] Neuberger listed six key steps for entities to take immediately to protect against ransomware.

President Joe Biden's nominee for head of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Jen Easterly, has not yet been confirmed. Sen. Gary Peters, D. Mich., who chairs the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, spoke June 23 on the Senate floor to urge quick confirmation of Easterly and Robin Carnahan, nominated as administrator of the General Services Administration.[6]

"Our country is under attack," Peters said. "Nation-state actors and criminal organizations are relentlessly targeting our government, critical infrastructure, and key industries to infiltrate networks, steal information, conduct espionage, or demand ransom payments."

The growth in ransomware attacks seems to correlate with the growth of cloud services and the advent of cryptocurrency, which provides bad actors with an easier way to anonymously collect ransom, said Roger Shindell, founder and CEO of Carosh Compliance Solutions.

Typically, CEs and BAs face a "very high" risk of getting hit by a ransomware attack, Shindell said. "Many organizations do not conduct adequate training. An attack is inevitable. The only question is if your systems and training will successfully repel these attacks."

Meanwhile, Herold said that ransomware attacks have increased "simply because so many organizations have paid the increasingly large ransoms. And they paid them rather quickly. Cybercrooks will increase doing what is making them money. As more organizations pay ransoms, more organizations will get hit with ransomware."

Working from home during the pandemic also created numerous additional security risks, Herold said, and ransomware succeeded as a result. "People working at home did not think they could be hit with ransomware there, the backups for systems used from home offices were not made, systems were not kept patched, and many other cybersecurity actions that were done within the facilities simply stopped being done in the remote locations of mobile and work-from-home employees. Ransomware crooks saw this vulnerability and associated opportunities, and exploited them," she explained.

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[1] Blair Caldwell, "St. Joseph's/Candler still dealing with impact of ransomware attack," WTOC 11, June 29, 2021, https://bit.ly/3qxDMY2.
[2] Matthew K. Maruca, "Notice of Data Breach," Reproductive Biology Associates, June 15, 2021, https://bit.ly/3jppRSk.
[3] Aleksandra Appleton, "Las Vegas hospital hit in cyberattack, data stolen," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 29, 2021, https://bit.ly/3h6ldqX.
[4] Cheryl Clark, "Ransomware Attack Leads to Class-Action Lawsuits for Scripps Health," *MedPage Today*, June 21, 2021, https://bit.ly/363J8Rm.
[5] Anne Neuberger "What We Urge You To Do To Protect Against The Threat of Ransomware," memo, June 2, 2021, https://bit.ly/3jF7TLX.
[6] U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, "Peters Urges Senate to Confirm Key Cybersecurity Nominees Amid Relentless Wave of Ransomware Attacks," news release, June 23, 2021, https://bit.ly/3Af7SUG.