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Congress Urged to Consider Privacy Protections in COVID-19 Relief Bills

Privacy advocates are acknowledging that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic might require looser standards for personal privacy, but they asked Congress to ensure that there were adequate limitations on the use of personal information.

“The proper use of personal data has the potential to have important benefits for public health as we face the COVID-19 crisis. However, allowing access to personal data, particularly health data, without guardrails could threaten fundamental rights and liberties and open the door to data exploitation that could violate civil rights and harm vulnerable populations,” 13 privacy groups said in a letter sent to lawmakers Friday.

“While some extraordinary necessary and proportionate measures may be taken during a time of crisis, those measures must be taken thoughtfully and fully withdrawn at the earliest moment after the emergency has passed,” they said. “In order to ensure this, it is not enough to expect that corporations will keep the promises they make in their unregulated terms of service. There must also be federal protections for new data collection, processing, and sharing, and real consequences for violations.”

“We the undersigned 13 groups strongly urge that forthcoming COVID-19 relief packages include privacy protections for data that is newly collected as a result of the crisis and pre-existing data that is used in new ways, whether that data was collected by government agencies or companies providing public health services,” they added. They called for, among other things, use restrictions on data collected to fight the pandemic and the deletion of data when the crisis ended.

Groups signing the letter include Access Now, Amnesty International, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, Center for Human Rights and Privacy, Consumer Federation Of America, Common Sense Media, Free Press Action, Media Alliance, New America’s Open Technology Institute, Oakland Privacy, Parent Coalition for Student Privacy, Public Citizen, Public Knowledge, and U.S. PIRG. —Tom Leithauser, tom.leithauser@wolterskluwer.com

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