

Ransomware Attack Renders LaSalle County Government Computers Unusable

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OTTAWA, Ill. (CBS) -- Hackers looking to score cash are now targeting the government in LaSalle County, Illinois.

Hundreds of computers at the county's administrative offices in Ottawa have been rendered unusable. As CBS 2's Marissa Parra reported, hackers locked them up using software called ransomware.

"Crazy is a good word for it; unexpected," said LaSalle County IT Director John Haag.

Haag hasn't been getting much sleep for the last 10 days, ever since he found out the LaSalle County government was being held virtually hostage.

"Currently, we are restoring our data from backups; trying to get our service back online, as well as repairing and reimaging all of the affected machines," Haag said.

Every single department within the county building is affected, except for the circuit clerk and court. That's 200 computers and 40 servers.

Haag found out about it in the wee hours of a Sunday morning 10 days ago.

"Three-thirty a.m. on the 23rd, I get a call from the sheriff's office saying they can't get to their reports," Haag said. "They encrypted and locked all our files and left a ransom note with an email address to find out how much we owe in the ransom."

But LaSalle County government was advised by the FBI not to click the link, so they don't actually know how much ransom is being demanded. But the estimate is in the thousands.

Haag insists the county has confirmed no data was stolen – despite the hackers' threats.

"This is how they bait you into giving money," he said.

It came as a surprise for a lot of them. LaSalle County is a rural one with just over 109,000 people. But ransomware can happen anywhere.

And with no computer system at the disposal, the county has to do everything by hand and on paper, which has made a headache out of previously simple tasks such as like keeping track of inmates or finding old records.

Haag said the county is not sure how the malware infiltrated the system. It could have been a phishing email, or it could have been a bad link from an internet browser.

Northwestern University Computer science expert Yan Chen said ransomware is a relatively new trend.

"It happened a couple years ago in 2018," he said. "We have seen ransomware has been popular since then."

Chen said it is a good idea to keep systems backed up and to keep up to date with the latest security software in case it happens to you.

We've seen other ransomware attacks locally too.

- February 2015: Midlothian PD hit by unknown ransomware.
- March 2016: Kankakee County hit by CryptoWall ransomware.
- February 2017: Roxana Police Department hit by unknown ransomware.
- March 2017: Wood River Police Department hit by unknown ransomware.
- April 2017: Perkin High School hit by unknown ransomware.
- May 2017: Cook County hit by WannaCry ransomware.
- October 2018: Moultrie County hit by unknown ransomware.
- October 2018: Crawford County hit by unknown ransomware.
- February 2019: Mt. Zion School District hit by unknown ransomware.
- August 2019: Lake County, Indiana hit by unknown ransomware.

The LaSalle County government said this will not interfere with elections coming up.

The FBI said it should be another two weeks until we find out how this happened.

In:

- [LaSalle County](#).

Source: <https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2020/03/04/ransomware-attack-renders-lasalle-county-government-computers-unusable/>