

Justice Would Back Records Privacy Bill --With Certain Changes

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The Justice Department said yesterday it could accept a bill guaranteeing the privacy of records on U.S. citizens if such guarantees didn't interfere with law enforcement activities.

"It is imperative that our legitimate access to third-party-held records [such as bank records] is not denied or unduly delayed," Assistant Attorney General Philip B. Heymann told a House subcommittee.

"At the same time, we are sensitive to the erosion of personal privacy that has resulted from advances in technology and changes in modern society," he told the House Judiciary subcommittee on courts, civil liberties and the administration of justice.

Heymann testified that the administration would support records privacy legislation now pending in the House if certain changes were made so that legitimate law enforcement activities could continue.

A similar bill also is pending in the Senate, and the Justice Department previously expressed its reservations to that bill.

Heymann said the House bill would make it harder for the government to ferret out white-collar crime and would make it almost impossible for the government to investigate counterintelligence activities.

The bill would require the government to inform citizens whenever it intended to look at their personal records held by a third party such as a financial institution. It also would give citizens the right to oppose such access before the records were unsealed.