

Minding Own Business Not So Easy

IT'S getting harder to mind our own business. Private information about us is getting into the hands of too many other people.

As a result, President Carter is pushing for legislation that would restrict dissemination of personal data which he says "is being flashed across the nation from computer to computer."

Main thrust of pending bills appears to be aimed at business, but government is by far the biggest source of personal information.

A few months ago, it was reported that some 3.9 billion (not million) records on individuals are stored in personal data systems of 97 federal agencies. By accident, intent or carelessness details may reach the hands of those who could and would misuse them.

For example: Department of Health, Education and Welfare keeps about 1.3 billion personal records in almost 700 data systems showing financial, marital and health information on recipients of its help.

Most people file tax returns, which are protected under the Privacy Act of 1974. Internal Revenue Service distributes leaflets assuring taxpayers of this privacy, except:

"The routine uses with respect to disclosure which may be made of tax return information include disclosure to the Department of Justice in connection with actual or potential criminal prosecution or civil litigation; to other federal agencies; to states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, or possessions of the United States to assist in the administration of tax laws; to other parties as authorized by law or regulations; and to foreign governments in accordance with treaties."

Some of the "other government agencies" referred to have hundreds of data banks and thousands of investigators. Possibilities for wide distribution of data on our private lives are multitudinous.

Proposed legislation would limit disclosure of medical records, establish privacy standards for insur-

ance records, and prevent use of computerized bank records for surveillance, and other things.

It's not just individuals who are concerned. Businesses must file great volumes of information in their multifarious dealings with government.

Businessmen complain that competitors have, in some cases, obtained this information and used it to make products or win customers.

Efforts to protect individual privacy have not always worked out well. Because of limitations on what employers may ask applicants, essential information about their past may be kept hidden.

Robert Ellis Smith of Washington, D.C., has recently published a book titled: "Privacy: How to Protect What's Left of It."

Smith says the federal government keeps an average of 18 files on the private lives of citizens. Business files are in addition. With that situation, who needs a "Big Brother" to watch over us?