

For immediate release

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GPEN Privacy Sweep finds significant involvement of data protection authorities in COVID-19 solution-finding

VICTORIA— The Global Privacy Enforcement Network (GPEN)'s annual international privacy sweep has found that data protection authorities (DPAs) around the world, including BC's Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner (OIPC), have focused resources on assessing the privacy implications of applications and other initiatives associated with COVID-19.

The annual privacy sweeps typically consist of a prescribed week for member DPAs to collect and assess information related to a predetermined theme. This year, the DPAs evaluated privacy risks associated with these COVID-19 initiatives and have set clear rules around the treatment of personal information that is involved.

The DPA's scrutinized contact tracing mobile apps, the use of electronic wristbands, COVID-19 vaccine registers, and national border registers.

Findings

Most DPA's pointed to the use of a COVID-19 contact tracing mobile app within their jurisdiction. Those technologies typically used Bluetooth technology to alert users if they have been near another app user who tests positive for coronavirus and whether they have visited a venue around the same time as another person who was reported as positive. While BC did not implement a contact tracing app, the OIPC consulted the government about the potential use of such a tool and worked with other regulators in Canada and abroad about the privacy considerations and implications of the technology.

The Sweep found that most health authorities carried out Privacy Impact Assessments (PIAs) and engaged their local DPA at an early stage to mitigate identified privacy risks. For instance, key concerns were the identification of individuals from personal information collected by contact tracing apps and the retention of personal information collected. DPAs recommended some of the following good practices: that personal information should be stored locally on users' devices rather than on centralised servers, and that personal information collected to fight against COVID-19 should be securely destroyed as soon as reasonably practicable once it is no longer needed.

All DPAs produced educational materials relating to privacy issues arising from COVID-19 health measures. In BC, the OIPC released guidance to organizations required to collect personal information at food and drink establishments for contact tracing purposes, to educators to help

them choose privacy complaint online learning tools, and to public bodies and organizations setting up remote workspaces for the first time.

Background

The aim of the 2020-21 GPEN Sweep is to help DPAs better understand, at the practical level, if and how privacy considerations have been taken into account by the organizations responsible for various COVID-19 solutions and initiatives, and what level of engagement DPAs have had with those organizations in their jurisdiction (whether via assessments of contact tracing apps or any other public or private sector initiative).

The Sweep explored how the global DPA community engaged with local governments, to identify and understand risks associated with COVID-19 initiatives and to make recommendations to improve compliance with privacy and data protection laws. And that, where necessary, (e.g., complaints or continuing risks), enforcement action may be undertaken. The Sweep also sought to understand what, if any, enforcement action DPAs might be considering, and what education and outreach activities DPAs conducted.

This year 20 DPAs from Europe, the Americas, Oceania, Asia, and the Middle East participated in the Sweep.

About GPEN and the Privacy Sweep:

GPEN was established in 2010 and serves as an informal network of international privacy enforcement authorities, comprising more than 60 privacy enforcement authorities in 39 jurisdictions, including British Columbia.

The full report is available here: <https://privacy.org.nz/assets/zLEGACY-FILES/Reports/GPEN-Sweep-2020-21-Report.pdf>

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