Hackers shut down Mecklenburg County servers, demand $23K ransom

Doug Stanglin, **USA TODAY**   Published 11:29 a.m. ET Dec. 6, 2017 | **Updated 1:49 p.m. ET Dec. 6, 2017**

(Photo: MariuszBlach, Getty Images/iStoc)

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Officials in North Carolina's Mecklenburg County say hackers are demanding $23,000 in ransom by early Wednesday afternoon to release multiple files they are holding hostage on the county's servers.

The hackers gave officials until 1 p.m. to pay the ransom with 2 Bitcoin in exchange for an encryption key that would release the files.

Mecklenburg, with Charlotte as the county seat, serves more than 1 million people as the state's most populous county.

County Manager Dena Diorio said a county employee clicked an attachment in an email that exposed the files to the hackers, WCNC-TV reported. The intrusion, in turn, caused a massive systemwide outage.

The shutdown has affected email, printing and other county applications and disrupted routine business at most county offices, WSOC-TV reported.

Diorio said Mecklenburg County officials are considering paying the ransom but are also evaluating how much it would cost to decrypt the files themselves.

"If you pay the bitcoin, there is always a risk they won't give you the encryption key," she said. "And they could go back for more (money)."

> **Joe Bruno**
> @JoeBrunoWSOC9
>
> I'm told the hackers are 7 hours ahead in time zones.. while it is unclear where the attack originated, the time zone includes part of Russia, @wsoctv
> 10:34 AM - Dec 6, 2017
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Diorio told WSOC-TV that she doesn't believe the hackers have access to personal information.

"We don't believe we were targeted," Diorio told the station. "We believe this is the world of cyber criminals."

Mecklenburg Commissioner Matthew Ridenhour said the county backs up its data regularly, and may have done so recently as over the weekend, *The Charlotte Observer* reports. If so, that could give authorities the ability to recreate most of the information if the county doesn't pay the ransom.

WSOC reporter Joe Bruno tweeted that it is unclear where the attack originated, but the hackers are in a time zone seven hours ahead of Charlotte, which would include Russia, where cybercrime is frequently based.