Chairman Swearingen and members of the State Affairs Committee, thank you for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill 213 (AB 213), the Lottery Privacy Act.

Winning the Wisconsin lottery may seem like a dream come true but it can quickly become a nightmare. In March, a Wisconsin native made history, winning $768 million playing the Powerball at a New Berlin convenience store.  Under current law, he was forced to expose his identity which was publicized in a press conference and spread across the nation. This type of attention has led to months of harassment that have forced the now multimillionaire to go “off the grid.”

AB 213 would provide new winners with the option to protect themselves from unwanted fraud, abuse or harassment. The bill will prohibit the Department of Revenue (DOR), lottery administrators and the retailer who sold the ticket from disclosing the lottery prize winner’s name, address, or Social Security number without the winner’s consent. While it offers a level of protection to the winners, it also maintains the integrity of the state lottery program. The bill allows for disclosures in order to determine the withholding of winnings for unpaid taxes, court judgements or child support. In addition, the DOR may release the location of the winning ticket, providing the store owner with the opportunity to advertise their sale.

Wisconsin would not be the first state to implement this type of law. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and other sources, there are ten states that currently allow lottery winners of varying prizes to remain anonymous including our neighbor to the east, Michigan. There have also been reports across the country of winners in states such as New Hampshire who have sued and won the ability to conceal their identity.

A few years ago, Milwaukee Magazine attempted to contact all the Wisconsin lottery winners of prizes over $500,000 since 1988. The author described the encounters as being met with deafening silence. Many of the winners did not want to share their stories and those who did asked for anonymity out of fear of additional harassment. The stories that were shared spoke to the fear and abuse many suffered at the hands of companies, relatives, friends, and complete strangers preying on their wealth. The lottery winners now speak out only to warn others of the dangers of the lottery.

The lottery provides a great benefit to both the taxpayers of our state and those who play the game. I ask you to please join me in supporting AB 213 in an effort to protect the integrity of our state lottery as well as the sanctity of a citizen’s privacy.