



Telephone Scams Preying on Vulnerable Adults

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Criminals use clever schemes to defraud millions of innocent people, often employing sophisticated technology and reinventing age-old scams that pressure people to make snap decisions that prey on a person's sympathies and vulnerabilities. Persons with disabilities and their family members often become unwitting targets of financial predators.

The Federal Trade Commission reports that every year, billions of dollars are lost to telephone and internet scams. A revival of an old scam involves con artists impersonating IRS agents, state revenue representatives, sheriff's deputies, police officers, or other federal or local law enforcement personnel. These scams encourage individuals receiving phone calls to share personal financial information, often resulting in damaging identity theft, fraud, unauthorized credit card use and the loss of retirement savings.

Another damaging financial ploy that occurs with frequency involves scammers calling a resident at home to claim there is an arrest warrant issued due to unpaid court fees or outstanding fines. These phone scammer scare the individual into providing confidential credit card or other payment information to avoid an immediate arrest. However, law enforcement officials never call people as an initial collection technique and simply do not accept credit card information over the telephone. Instead, police and law enforcement officers generally arrange to meet a person at a courthouse or police station in order to arrange payment for any outstanding fines.

Scaring a financial exploitation victim with phony court fines is not the only trick up a con-artist's sleeve, as tax-related issues are becoming a popular scamming technique. Police departments frequently receive reports complaining of phone scammers telling property owners that they will be arrested for failure to pay back taxes unless an immediate phone payment is made. Additionally, fraudulent telephone calls purportedly have been made on

behalf of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) seeking payment of alleged back taxes, penalties and interest, once again threatening arrest and prosecution for failure to pay immediately. These sophisticated tax-scammers also often request payment by credit card, prepaid debit cards and wire transfers. These strategies are NEVER used by federal, state or local government agencies as a method of collection and any request that payment of a government fine or tax be made by phone constitutes a clear “red flag” that should not be ignored.

Sometimes it is hard to identify truth from fiction, since scammers often have just enough personally identifying information to make the call sound legitimate. For instance, the IRS has noted that the scams often involve (a) using fake names and official-sounding IRS badge numbers, (b) reciting the last four digits of a victim’s Social Security number and other personal information, (c) using “caller ID spoofing” to make a call appear to originate from an IRS toll-free number or phone number of a government agency or police department, (d) sending bogus IRS emails to support the content of a call, (d) manufacturing background noise that mimics a company call site, (e) hanging up after threatening jail time or a driver’s license revocation, and having a second scammer call back pretending to be from the local police or DMV to reinforce the threat.

There are several simple ways to help prevent yourself or a loved one from becoming a victim of financial exploitation. For instance, never provide bank account numbers, credit card numbers, or other personal information over the phone to someone you do not know. Be aware of the red flag if a caller asks you to make a wire transfer, send cash to discharge a fine or debt, or buy a prepaid debit card via phone. Remember to take your time and never feel rushed into making a decision or giving in to pressure to “act now.” It also is a good idea to contact your local police department or IRS office if you are unsure whether a call is legitimate or a scam. Reviewing financial decisions with a trusted family member before acting also is a way to get another set of eyes on the situation. Be aware that caller ID spoofing exists and the origin of a call can be faked. Furthermore, if you receive a call from a person claiming to be a law enforcement official or other government agent, hang up and find the agency’s number on your own to investigate – you may wait a few minutes (or longer) to be connected, but at least you know you will be speaking with a legitimate agent.

For more information on scams visit www.attorneygeneral.gov or www.fbi.gov. The IRS number is 800-829-1040. For IRS related scams, contact the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration at 800-366-4484. For general information, complaints or questions you can also contact the local Attorney General’s Office in your state. Your local police department is always willing to help. Finally, attorneys in the Special Needs Alliance are

often knowledgeable about currently popular scams to avoid and can always act as a sounding board to work through suspicious questions.

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