



Consumer Tip September 2016: How to Prevent Senior Fraud



As the senior population in this country continues to grow, so do the financial crimes committed against them. Stealing seniors' hard-earned money is one of the most prevalent forms of financial fraud that takes place today. Scammers are repugnant but not stupid, and they prey on the vulnerability, trusting nature and, often, the loneliness that make seniors an easy target.

The best way to prevent this is education about the common scams and fraud techniques used by those who target the elderly. This means not only ensuring that seniors in your life know what to watch, but also that they will come to a loved one for advice before they take action when approached by someone asking for money or personal information. Listed below are some of the most common scams currently used to victimize seniors.

The Grandparent Scam

A perpetrator pretends to be a grandchild, law enforcement officer or medical professional with a story that the grandchild is in legal or medical trouble and needs money immediately to resolve the issue. Scam artists can easily access grandkids' personal information from simple internet research. Never give money or personal information. Say you'll call back, and check with other relatives before doing anything.

Telemarketing, Email and Sweepstakes Scams

This includes fake sweepstakes, the most common form of fraud that impacts seniors. Any sweepstakes or lottery that requires advance fees or upfront charges is a scam. Never wire money to a stranger. Another type of telemarketing scam is the fake governmental agency call, which aims to get access to government benefits and includes requests for personal information such as social security numbers or Medicare information. Never give personal information to someone who calls. Ask for the request in writing and go to the official government webpage—if it exists—to find contact information. Then call that agency directly.

Medicare Fraud

Every American older than 65 is eligible for Medicare, and scam artists often pose as Medicare representatives to solicit personal information. As mentioned above, a caller may claim to represent a government agency and state that a Medicare or Medicaid card needs to be replaced. This is a ruse to get a senior's personal information for the purpose of identity theft.

Fraudulent medical bills are then filed with Medicare, using the stolen identity. With other scams, services and screenings are provided through mobile clinics at senior centers, and personal information is collected to bill Medicare for fraudulent services. Always ask questions and know that free services should never require that personal information be provided.

Investment Schemes

Remember that if it seems too good to be true, it usually is. Be suspicious of anyone who promises massive returns on an investment or offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Be sure to only deal with reputable and credible institutions. Before making any investment, no matter the amount, check with your financial planner or a trusted love one to ensure it's legitimate.

Repair Fraud

Repair fraud is very common among seniors. Never pay for a repair upfront—often the services may never be provided. Check with friends and family members about costs and the schedule of things you're unsure of, such as how often to change your tires or what the going rate is for lawn care.

Funeral and Cemetery Scams

This usually happens in two ways. In the first, a perpetrator will scan obituaries and contact the grieving widow or widower with a claim that the deceased had an outstanding debt. Never pay this without independent confirmation. Alternately, seniors are exploited by disreputable funeral homes, which will use unfamiliarity with funeral costs to add unnecessary charges.

It's not always strangers perpetrating these crimes. According to the National Council on Aging, the majority of reported elder abuse is committed by an older person's own family members, most often the adult children, followed by grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

The best rule of thumb for seniors to avoid being victimized by a stranger is to never provide personal information, and don't send money or provide a credit card number to "verify," "guarantee" or "process" a prize.

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