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Home > Money

Scam calls target seniors: 'It's me, Grandma!'

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What grandparent doesn't want to come to the rescue of his or her grandchild?

That's the basis of the "grandparent scam," which has been going on for several years and has targeted people all over the United States and Canada. Well-meaning senior citizens who think they are helping a grandchild in distress have lost thousands of dollars to con artists.

It's a particularly despicable scam in that it preys on a grandparents' love and concern for their grandchildren.

It usually starts with a frantic phone call from someone claiming to be their grandchild who is traveling in a foreign country and is in "a heap of trouble."

A Boynton Beach couple bilked of more than \$5,000 are among the latest victims. They asked that their names not be used for fear they will be targeted in another scam.

In November, they received a call from someone claiming to be with the U.S. Embassy in Madrid who said their grandson was in trouble there. He had been arrested for speeding, and police found marijuana in his car.

"They put him on the phone, but said he could not talk long. We thought it was him. He specifically said, 'Please don't call mom. She will disown me,'" the Boynton grandmother said.

"They said he needed the money because he was going to have a trial. The call was for money to get him back home to Massachusetts," she continued. "I wanted to talk to the judge. They said the judge was in Barcelona.

"Whatever I asked them, they had an answer for."

The grandparents wired \$2,600 through Western Union as instructed. Soon came another call claiming their grandson had missed his flight, and they needed to send more money. They sent another \$2,800.

"I thought we should call our daughter, but she was going through a stressful time. I thought if she found out about this, it would push her over the edge," the woman said.

The grandparents were so worried and upset the situation that they couldn't sleep.

Within a day or two, their grandson returned the call they had made to his cellphone.

"Hi, how are you? What's going on? I'm working in Virginia," he said.

His call came just in time to stop a third payment.

Don't send money

It's not clear how the con artists find grandparents.

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One theory is that it's through random calls. Another is that Facebook and other websites are being mined for information, law enforcement officials have said.

One tactic used, the Better Business Bureau warns, is for the caller to say, "It's me, Grandma!" Don't respond with a name, but instead let the caller explain who he is.

To confirm the person is your relative, ask a simple question such as, "What's the name of your school?" or "What's your middle name?"

If you have fallen victim to the scam, BBB recommends that you report the incident immediately to police and the Florida Attorney General's Office.

Jerry Feblowitz, a volunteer at Seniors vs. Crime in West Palm Beach, a special project of the Florida attorney general, said it's common for con artists posing as the grandchild to claim they are in Canada.

"Don't send any money. If people have a problem, contact us. We can tell them what not to do," Feblowitz said.

The Boynton Beach couple regrets falling for the scheme. When they spoke with the FBI, agents told them the area code for the numbers the money was wired to showed the calls came from Canada, not Spain.

Their money is gone, but they don't want others to become victims.

"Every agency I spoke to emphasized I should tell everyone I meet and warn people that this is going on," the grandmother said.

~ susan_salisbury@pbpost.com

Don't become a victim of the scam

- If someone calls claiming to be a grandchild or other relative asking for money, confirm the status of the individual by calling them directly or verifying the story with other family members before taking any action.
- Do not allow yourself to be caught up in a false sense or urgency. That can lead to making emotional, instead of logical decisions.
- Any request to wire money through Western Union or MoneyGram should be seen as a red flag and an immediate tip-off that the call may be part of a scam.
- Funds sent via wire transfer are hard to track once received by scammers and are usually not recoverable by law enforcement or banking officials.

Source: Better Business Bureau

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