

Beware of “Family Member in Trouble” Scams – October 2011

Joe Hoy, Eagle County Sheriff

Let me tell you a story. A married couple, senior citizens, received a phone call the other day from their son who is in a foreign country. Their son tells them that he has been involved in a traffic accident and although not injured, is in some very serious legal trouble. The couple, shocked and concerned about their son's welfare, asked for further details on what they can do to help. The son explains that he does not have much time to talk, but in this country the law system is different and he could be kept in custody for some time before arrangement can be made to have his case move forward. Then their son tells them “the injured party in the accident has agreed not to press charges if the couple sends money to help settle the matter.” The couple, extremely upset agrees to the arrangement and wires a large amount of money to the off shore account. They are assured that this will help settle the matter and he should be able to return to the United States the next day. The couple feels that they can breathe a little easier now.

The next day, they get another call from their son with some not so good news. The passenger, of the other car involved in the accident, is now demanding a cash settlement or they will go to the authorities. The son again asks for money (now in the thousands) to be sent to help him get out of this mess and back home. He sounds exhausted, frightened and not himself. Again the family sends the money.

I think by now you are getting the picture. The couple starts to question the validity of the situation and try calling their son on his cell. He answers from his home in the Midwest. He is fine and has not been out of the country for some time. The full gravity of the situation quickly sets in.

The couple, like many others, became a victim of a very elaborate and sophisticated scam that mainly targets retired senior citizens throughout the country. Oh, by the way, this happened in our county just last week.

Now, before anyone sits back and thinks how naive and foolish this couple was and that you are too smart to have the wool pulled over your eyes like this...think again. This is not your old fashion flim-flam type of deception. These are smart, sophisticated, cagey and manipulating criminals. In today's modern world with all of its modern conveniences like Google and Facebook it is very easy for professional con artist to access personal information and prey on innocent individuals.

Middle age parents and grandparents are most likely to be targets for these “family member in trouble” schemes. As the mother explained to me, the voice on the line sounded just like her son. This couple feels embarrassed, duped and stupid for falling for such a con. I told them that they are not the first and they will definitely not be the last to fall for this sort of thing. Most of the people who are targeted are fairly well off, have a “nest egg” they can easily tap into and have excellent credit- all of which make them attractive targets for the con artists.

So now what can they do? Not much. They reported it to their local authorities but frankly, there is not much law enforcement can do either. Since the funds were transferred outside the country there is little to no way to track the money trail. Many people who fall victim to this type of con do not report it because they may not know who to report it to, are too ashamed for being scammed or they don't know they have even

been scammed until sometime later, days or even weeks after the scam happens. They may also fail to report the incident because they may be concerned that relatives may think the victims no longer have the mental capacity to take care of themselves and their financial affairs.

I can only imagine how my wife and I would react if we got a call concerning one of our children or grandchildren. We would want to act as quickly as possible to help them out. So please remember, if you or someone in your family experiences a similar situation don't panic and do exactly what the caller wants. Instead stop and ask for specific details, get a call back number, check with other family members to verify the person calling is who they claim to be and that they are where they say they are. Never give out personal information until you have verified who you are speaking to. If you do fall victim to a scam or have reason to believe that someone has attempted to scam you contact your local authorities as soon as possible. The sooner you report the information the better the chances are of finding the perpetrator and protecting others from falling victim as well.