



CONSUMER ADVOCATE

A publication from the Consumer Protection Section of the Office of Ohio Attorney General Richard Cordray

STOP FRAUD IN ASSISTED LIVING HOMES: NEW PROGRAM AIMS TO HELP OLDER OHIOANS

Some unscrupulous salespeople target assisted living residents, selling them financial products they do not need or providing faulty insurance information.

To protect older Americans from this kind of fraud, Attorney General Richard Cordray and other state agencies have launched an outreach program called “Plan Well, Live Well: Seniors Fighting Fraud,” addressing current scams and tips to fight fraud.

Interest in the program has been high, leading to more than 50 workshops already scheduled throughout the state. The workshops educate older Americans and their caretakers on consumer scams,

insurance and investment issues and long-term care rights.

Statistics indicate that seniors are the targets of 30 percent of reported fraud and are three times more likely to become victims of scams. Awareness plays a key role in preventing such losses.

Joining Attorney General Cordray in this effort are the Governor’s office, the Ohio Department of Insurance, the Ohio Department of Commerce and the Ohio Department of Aging.

To request a “Plan Well, Live Well: Seniors Fighting Fraud” presentation for your organization, please contact Michele Pearson at (614) 466-8170.

FACEBOOK USERS BEWARE: SCAMMERS ON FACEBOOK

Some scammers are using social networking sites to learn about potential victims. In some cases, they comb through Facebook and MySpace profiles to find information about a consumer’s spring break or vacation plans.

Using this specific information, they contact the consumer’s family and friends, pretend to be the real consumer and ask for emergency cash.

For example, let’s say a college

student named Dan posts on his Facebook page that he’ll be studying abroad in Italy this summer. A scammer reads Dan’s post, and then contacts Dan’s grandparents, pretending to be Dan.

The scammer may say, “Hi Grandma, it’s me, Dan. You know how I’m studying abroad this summer? Well, I’ve gotten into some trouble, and I need you to wire transfer \$4,000 to Italy. Please don’t tell my mom or dad.”

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CORDRAY WORKS TO PROTECT HOMEOWNERS

June is a common time for home repairs, as homeowners either are cleaning up from a damaging winter or reckoning with damage caused by springtime winds and heavy rain.

Many contractors compete for this home improvement business; unfortunately, some try to defraud their customers.

Last week, in response to the Northwest Ohio tornados, Ohio Attorney General Richard Cordray and the Better Business Bureau set up an information center in Wood County to warn homeowners of fly-by-night contractors.

Fly-by-night contractors prey on vulnerable consumers. They take money for services they do not provide and make promises they do not keep.

To protect Ohioans, Cordray conducted a statewide law enforcement sweep. In mid-May, he announced charges, and in some cases judgments, against eight home improvement companies accused of swindling consumers.

In one case, a Columbus-area company was accused of contracting with Ohio consumers to do roofing and kitchen remodeling and then failing to provide the services for which consumers paid.

Homeowners can help protect themselves by not paying in advance for home improvement work. They also should be wary of contractors who don’t provide proper identification or don’t have a permanent place of business.

For more home improvement tips or to file a complaint, visit www.SpeakOutOhio.gov or call (800) 282-0515.

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Of course, any money the grandparents send will be pocketed by the scammer, not by Dan.

To protect yourself and your loved ones from scams, follow these tips:

- **Check your privacy settings regularly.** Make sure you're not sharing more information than you intend on sites like Facebook and MySpace.
- **Don't post too many details online.** If you're going on vacation, don't post your travel plans online, where anyone could view them. Not only could scammers contact your family members pretending to be you, they also could try to steal your mail or break into your house.
- **Set up a code system.** Establish an emergency code word or phrase to use when a family member or friend really is in trouble.
- **Watch for suspicious applications.** Don't trust applications (apps) that ask for your cell phone number, Social Security number or bank account information.

Learn more about scams at www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/SpeakOutOhio/Scams.

HAVE A PROBLEM? FILE A COMPLAINT

If you have a consumer problem that you can't solve on your own, file a complaint with Attorney General Richard Cordray's office. We'll do everything we can to help you resolve it.

In 2009, consumer complaints filed with the Attorney General's office reached a record high with more than 30,000 complaints.

Through the office's complaint resolution process and legal action, approximately \$7 million in consumer restitution, civil penalties, costs and other relief was generated in 2009.

File a complaint online at www.SpeakOutOhio.gov or by calling (800) 282-0515.

SCAMS VARY MORE THAN EVER BEFORE

Mass-marketing fraud schemes, which can occur via telephone, the Internet, mass mailings or other modes of mass-communication, are now more diverse than ever.

According to a June report from the International Mass-Marketing Fraud Working Group, "law enforcement officials see a broader array of mass-marketing fraud schemes than ever before."

The schemes range from fake check scams to online lottery or car-selling scams. In one case, a 67-year-old business owner lost more than \$570,000 in an inheritance scam. The loss cost him his home, his business and his life savings.

The report also says that fraud operations are increasingly interconnected and transnational, which limits law enforcement's ability to track and stop them.

Some operations also are very fluid, meaning they can adapt and change their methods quickly.

Estimates indicate that mass-marketing fraud costs U.S. consumers hundreds of millions, even billions, of dollars a year.

Fortunately, you can help stop the losses. Using tools from the Attorney General's office, including our newsletters and Scam Alert Widget, you can warn your family members, friends and neighbors about emerging scams.

You also can encourage them to subscribe to the Consumer Advocate and report suspected scams at www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/ReportaScam or by calling (800) 282-0515.

WANT UPDATES?

- Receive the Consumer Advocate via e-mail by signing up at www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/ConsumerAdvocate.
- Receive news and updates from the Ohio Attorney General's Office by signing up at www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov.
- Visit www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov for more information.