

PROTECTING OLDER ADULTS FROM SCAMS

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According to the University of Michigan's Institute for Healthcare Policy & Innovation 2023 National Poll on Healthy Aging, 1 in 3 older Michiganders became scam victims in the previous two years, while 84% of Michiganders aged 50 to 80 said they want to know more about how to protect themselves.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) estimates seniors lose \$81.5 billion annually, including unreported losses. According to AARP, it's believed that less than 10% of victims of fraud ever report it.

Here are common scams to be aware of and steps you can take to avoid them based on trends and advice from the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), AARP, the United States Postal Inspection Service (USPIS), the National Council on Aging (NCOA), and the Michigan Consumer Protection (CP) team:

ROMANCE SCAMS

The scammer preys on lonely adults. They profess their love early on, can never meet in person, and have an urgent need for money or an investment opportunity. They often befriend you for months before they ever ask for money. The photos they provide of themselves are either stolen or created using artificial intelligence (AI). Once you realize it's a scam, and try to disengage, they often threaten to reveal your activities if you don't follow through with payment.

TECH SUPPORT SCAMS

The scammer poses as a representative of a reputable company such as Microsoft or Apple using a phone call, email, or computer pop-up. They either require payment to fix your

computer or otherwise scare you into giving them remote access to your computer so they can steal personal and financial information. If you're being scammed, end all communication by hanging up the phone or disconnecting your computer.

According to AARP, most scams have these three things in common:

- 1) they are unsolicited,
- 2) they evoke high emotions,
- 3) and they create a sense of urgency.

GRANDPARENT SCAMS

The scammer typically pretends to be your grandchild or family member who has been arrested, injured, or needs an emergency car repair. There's often a noisy background or they sound emotional so you can't hear them well. Other scammers use technology to replicate someone's voice or phone number. They may use another actor to

pretend to be a police officer, lawyer, or doctor demanding payment by wire transfer or gift cards since those methods are untraceable. They may threaten further danger if you tell anyone. Verify the story before sending money.

OTHER SCAMS

Other common scams include government impersonators including Medicare, Social Security, Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Veterans Administration (VA) or Department of Defense (DoD); bank-representative impersonators; sweepstakes or lottery scams; text messages that you have postage due for a package; and home-repair scams that require payment up front for work they will never perform.

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The most common ways scammers take your money are large bank transfers; cryptocurrency (such as Bitcoin, Ethereum, Dogecoin) deposits; large gift-card purchases; person-to-person payment apps



such as Zelle, Venmo, and CashApp; and credit card charges. Don't wire money, don't provide your bank account information, don't withdraw cash, and don't send gift cards unless you've confirmed that the story is real. Crypto scammers will try to convince you to withdraw cash from your bank and go deposit it in a "safe" ATM using an account number provided. The ATM is typically a cryptocurrency ATM and after the cash is deposited into the scammer's crypto account, it's nearly impossible to trace or recover. An internet search of "cryptocurrency ATMs in Mason County MI" will show you how many are available here.

IF YOU'RE ALREADY A VICTIM:

If you think you've been scammed, the first thing you should do according to AARP is to cut off all communication with the scammer. Your next step should be to contact your banks and credit card companies immediately to minimize their access to your accounts and your money. Your next step is to file a report with law enforcement. Consider changing your passwords, having your computer professionally cleaned of malware, and report it to consumer protection agencies such as the FTC's www.ReportFraud.ftc.gov, the U.S. Dept of Justice's National Elder Fraud Hotline (for victims aged 60 and older) at 833-372-8311, Michigan's Consumer Protection Team at 877-765-8388, or the AARP Fraud Watch Network Helpline at 877-908-3360.

TIPS:

Don't answer the phone if you don't know the number. Hover over an email sender's address and read it carefully to verify it's legitimate before clicking on anything. Never let someone claiming to be tech support have remote access to your computer. Choose a secret family password or phrase ahead of time to use in legitimate emergencies.

RESOURCES TO STAY VIGILANT:

- To reduce spam calls, register at the FTC's donotcall.gov or call 1-888-382-1222.

- Talk to your phone carrier about how to block unwanted spam calls. Some offer this service for free and some charge a fee for a plan with a stronger filter.
- Keep your antivirus software and operating systems updated.
- Consider setting up the call screening feature on your iPhone or Android.
- Sign up for free AARP Watchdog Alerts at www.aarp.org/watchdogalerts.
- Use annualcreditreport.com once a year for free (877-322-8228) to identify suspicious activity on your credit report. It's the only government-sanctioned free credit report. You do not have to pay for this service to see your credit report from the three major credit reporting agencies although they will offer you paid plans.
- Use charitynavigator.org to verify a charity before donating.
- Use strong, unique passwords for different accounts.
- Shred sensitive information.
- Monitor your bills and financial accounts in real time online.
- Use multi-factor authentication which requires more than one authentication step such as password and a one-time use code texted or emailed to you.

If your local group needs a free presentation on protecting older adults from scams, or if you have questions about anything in this article or about resources for seniors, please email Susan Evans at sevans@masoncountymi.gov or call 231-316-6523.

Seniors who need help finding programs and services can also contact AAAWM at 888-456-5664 Mon-Fri from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Another helpful resource is the *Active for Life* publication for seniors which is available throughout the community and at www.scottvilleareaseniorcenter.com.