

Post Your Problems

Scam artists play 'dialing for dollars'

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By Lawrence Walsh, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The latest telephone and text message scam surfaced in Philadelphia, crept into Wilkes-Barre and Scranton and then spread into Harrisburg.

"We could trace its advance by the number and location of telephone calls and e-mails we received from victims and near victims," said Nils Frederiksen, deputy press secretary for Attorney General Tom Corbett.

"It may be moving into your area next," he said, referring to Pittsburgh and other cities and towns in Western Pennsylvania. "The scammers are using boiler rooms [no-frills call centers] and working their way through the state's area codes."

The latest attempt to separate Pennsylvanians from their money is an international long-distance telephone scam with two variations:

Consumers receive phone or text messages asking them to call what appears to be an ordinary long-distance number to confirm a lottery or sweepstakes prize.

The other, more insidious variation of the scam asks consumers to call the number to get information about a relative who purportedly has been injured in an accident or is hospitalized.

"Unsuspecting consumers who return these messages are actually calling international long-distance numbers, mainly in the Caribbean, and can be charged hundreds of dollars per minute for the calls," Mr. Corbett said.

"In most cases, the scam artists are trying to get consumers to divulge personal or financial information. But even callers who don't fall victim to that portion of the scam can still be hit with massive long-distance telephone bills."

Mr. Corbett said the crooks are taking advantage of the fact that some international numbers, such as 876 (Jamaica), 345 (the Cayman Islands), 284 (the British Virgin Islands) and 809 (the Dominican Republic), look like ordinary domestic area codes.

"Consumers should be extremely suspicious about any unsolicited telephone or text messages about lotteries, sweepstakes or other prizes, unless they can verify that they are coming from a legitimate source," he said. "[They also] should be cautious about any message that directs them to call an unfamiliar phone number."

If a consumer returns a call, the scammers do everything they can to keep them on the phone for as long as possible. The longer the call, the bigger the bill.

Mr. Frederiksen said one of the most outrageous examples of the scam was reported by a Philadelphia woman who said her parents were called about a sweepstakes prize they "won." The caller wanted personal and financial information from them so their "claim" could be "processed."

The parents didn't fall for it, he said. But, when they told their adult daughter about it, she called the scammers and gave them a piece of her mind. They didn't care and kept her on the line. Among other things, they told her they would continue calling her parents unless she sent them \$100.

"She was extremely irate when she contacted us about this, and understandably so," Mr. Frederiksen said. "These scammers obviously have no shame, no ethics."

The remedy?

Call directory assistance or an operator to check on the location for any unfamiliar number, and ask what the per-minute charges are for the number.

Consumers also should carefully review their monthly phone bills and immediately contact their phone company to dispute any unauthorized charges.

"Consumers shouldn't pay any of those charges," Mr. Frederiksen said. "They should let their phone company take care of them. We have been in contact with the phone companies about these scams.

"Consumers, especially the cell phone generation, may not question calls from other area codes because their phone plans include long-distance service. They hit 'recall' without thinking. But international call rates aren't regulated by the Federal Communications Commission like traditional long-distance domestic calls are."

He said consumers contacted by these scammers should file a complaint with the Bureau of Consumer Protection, a unit of the attorney general's office, at its toll-free number, 1-800-441-2555, or go to www.attorneygeneral.gov, highlight the "Complaints" button on the front page and select "Consumer Complaints" from the drop-down menu.

"We want to hear from people so we will know where the scammers are placing their calls," Mr. Frederiksen said.

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