

Is the IRS really texting you? Nope

Federal Trade Commission hosts webinar on spotting scams and fraud in Indian Country

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Before you reply to that text from an unknown number claiming to be a government agency, the phone call from tech support or your bank, or an e-mail asking you to verify payroll information, it would be wise to pause and not respond.

More likely than not, it's a scammer who wants to steal your personal information for nefarious purposes.

That was the message behind a Federal Trade Commission webinar for Native American news media titled "Spotting and Avoiding Scams in Indian Country."

"Every year, scammers steal hundreds of millions of dollars from people by pretending to be government or tech support, selling useless products or promoting fake lotteries and sweepstakes," an FTC press release stated.

Approximately 40 people logged into the Zoom teleconferencing application on Thursday, Nov. 10, to attend the webinar. The briefing is part of a new national initiative by the FTC to "build public awareness among Native Americans about how to spot and avoid scams in their communities, as well as where to report them."

"The FTC has long been dedicated to protecting demographically diverse communities and it is a priority to reach out to Native American communities," Bureau of Consumer Protection Deputy Director Monica Vaca said. "We are here to start a conversation about what fraud looks like."

The webinar included fraud sta-



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~ Grand Ronde Tribal Police Chief Jake McKnight

tistics, legal action the FTC took to fight it and get money back for consumers, free resources to help protect against scams and a personal story from a Navajo Nation member about her experience being scammed by an auto dealer near the Reservation.

Vaca shared some sobering fraud statistics from 2021: There were more than 2.9 million reports of fraud to the FTC, of which 25 percent of people reported losing money, adding up to a staggering \$6.1 billion.

"That's just the ones we actually heard about," she said. "We know fraud losses exceed that number."

The top scam of 2021 was the "imposter scam." Essentially, a scammer contacts a person via phone, e-mail and increasingly through a text message, and pretends to be someone a person trusts from a well-known business, bank or government agency. They'll tell you your Social Security number was compromised, you've been implicated in a crime, your bank account information is needed to process a refund, or there is a family member in need of help, to give a few examples.

Vaca implored those who have been the victim or intended victim of a scam to report it to reportfraud.ftc.gov.

"We can use the information to bring civil lawsuits to stop illegal practices and, when it is possible, to get money back for people who lost it to scams or unscrupulous business practices," she said.

She cited a case example of Tate's Auto Group in Arizona and New Mexico, which were charged in 2018 with deceiving customers and falsifying information on vehicle financing forms. Many of those affected were members of the Navajo Nation. Ultimately, the dealerships paid a \$450,000 settlement to approximately 3,500 consumers who had been scammed by the dealership's deceptive business practices.

"Cars are one of the biggest purchases consumers make and it's a lifeline, a necessity to get from place to place," Vaca said.

A Navajo Nation Tribal member, "Sherrie," who only used her first name, told attendees about her experience being the victim of predatory dealership lending.

The Navajo Reservation is approximately 27,000 square miles and very dispersed, often with dirt and gravel roads, which can become treacherous during the winter. Sherrie, who owned a Nissan Sentra, wanted something more durable and safe.

After receiving a flier in the mail, she visited a local dealership at the Reservation border town of Winslow, and ultimately was scammed into buying a new vehicle with a verbal promise that she could trade in her Nissan. A few weeks later, she began receiving phone calls about her car payment being late and was ultimately sent to collections for a \$10,500 debt. Her car, which she thought was used for a trade-in, was auctioned off. With bills mounting and her credit ruined, she sought legal help from a Flagstaff nonprofit, DNA-People's Legal Services, and after more than 18 months received a settlement from the auto dealer.

Assistant Director of the Midwest Region Joannie Wei noted that other common scams in Indian Country include phishing e-mails with authentic-looking invoices, companies offering debt relief, tech support scams and callers asking for payment via gift cards or wire transfers.

"That's always 100 percent a

scam," she said. "Those issues are impacting communities broadly. We need to talk about these scams because the more we know, the more we will help people to avoid them."

If someone suspects they're being targeted by a scam artist, Wei advises never giving out personal or financial information and resisting the pressure to act immediately.

"Before you give out any information, tell somebody you trust about what is going on," Wei said.

She also advises browsing ftc.gov/consumer-alerts to get up-to-date information about the latest frauds and scams.

Grand Ronde Tribal Police Chief Jake McKnight provided some local context, but was not a participant in the webinar.

"We've tried to get out and educate as many people as we can in the community about these scams," he said. "A common one is someone claiming to be from a government agency, usually the IRS, saying you need to pay back taxes now or go to jail."

McKnight said another scam is a variation of the imposter scam, where the caller poses as a federal agent and tells the intended victim someone rented a car in another state in their name and it contained drugs and their Social Security number linked to different accounts. If they don't cooperate with the investigation, the scammer says, they'll go to jail.

"We had a young Tribal member and her dad come in to tell us about the scam and we immediately told her to cancel her credit cards and check if her Social Security number had been used," McKnight said.

McKnight said that in the past few years the department hasn't received as many reports as it used to, but that Tribal members should remain vigilant when interacting with someone they don't know via phone, e-mail or text, especially if they insist on being paid via wire transfers or gift cards.

"Never, ever give your information to someone over the phone," he said. "I'd also like to remind people no law enforcement department, no matter where they're from, would ever ask for money over the phone. If that happens, call us right away."

The nonemergency line for the Grand Ronde Tribal Police is 503-879-1835.

McKnight cautions that getting consumers' money back after they've been scammed is very difficult.

"We do the best we can, but it's a very rare occasion that anything happens," he said. "If you don't know the person, don't give out your information. You just can't do that anymore. Scams are happening everywhere." ■

Winter Crafts for Preschool Families

Wednesday, December 21, 2022
2:00-3:30 or 5:00-6:30 p.m.
In the Kwis Kwis & Chak Chak classrooms

All preschool families are invited to come spend quality time together.

Come make pipe cleaner Ornaments and Holiday cards!

Cocoa & treats

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