

Schemes, Scams, and Fraud: How to Protect Yourself During the Holidays and All Year Long

By Heidi Richardson,
Quality Assurance Coordinator/Financial Abuse Specialist
Sacramento County Adult Protective Services

Crooks work overtime year round – not only during the holidays - to concoct new and devious ways of scamming you and taking advantage of your kindness. Financial abuse by con artists takes many forms ranging from holiday charity scams, unlicensed contractor fraud, lottery scams, investment fraud, telemarketing schemes, and sweetheart scams, to name a few. The majority of financial abuse victims never get their money back. Because restitution, refunds, and the return of money is so rare, being prepared in advance to avoid unscrupulous solicitations is critical.

Individuals who grew up in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were generally raised to be polite and trusting; two very important and positive personality traits, except when it comes to dealing with a con-man. The con-man will exploit these traits knowing that it is difficult or impossible for you to say "no" or just hang up the phone.* You should immediately hang up on telemarketing calls, never open your door to unknown visitors, and shred all mail involving donation or charity requests.

During the holidays and all year long, reduce your risk of being scammed by following these tips:

- Don't make investments alone. Consult with trusted friends, family, or a reputable professional before investing or signing any contract and consult with more than one person if possible. The California Department of Corporations SAIF (Seniors Against Investment Fraud) Program is an excellent and free resource for information on investing safely.
- Ask questions and take as much time as you need to understand a financial product or contract. Don't be embarrassed if you feel confused and don't sign anything you don't understand.
- Dishonest friends, family, and professionals can steal your money too. Just because someone acts caring does not mean they are. Crooks can be excellent actors.
- Protect incoming and outgoing mail. Always collect your own mail.



Photo caption: Adult Protective Services encourages you to always talk with trusted friends or relatives before signing a contract or sending money to someone you do not know. If it sounds too good to be true, it is.

Scams are frequently in the news and the cause of devastating financial loss to victims. In 2006, Sacramento County Adult Protective Services (APS) responded to 4472 reports of elder and dependent adult abuse countywide; 916 were financial abuse reports.

- Keep your personal information such as social security number and bank account numbers confidential. Never give out personal information to anyone over the phone or shows up unannounced at your door.
- Be wary of anyone claiming to be “Senior Certified” or calling themselves a financial advisor with no other credentials. These titles are usually meaningless. Find out what type of degree and license a professional has and research them.
- Get second and third opinions before making major financial decisions, including contracting work on your home. Call the Contractor’s State Licensing Board or check their website to research any prospective contractor. Don’t ever hire a “handyman” showing up at your door.
- Check your credit report. Credit reports are available free of charge. Consider a security freeze which can reduce your risk of identity theft by preventing new credit accounts in your name. Contact the California Department of Consumer Affairs for further information.
- Financial planning seminars offering free lunch are often designed to single out vulnerable seniors and attempt to sell them financial or legal services and products they don’t need.
- If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. A telephone call claiming you won an out of country lottery but just need to send a payment for taxes is always a scam. Avoid contests and never send money to people you have never met.
- Scare tactics are unprofessional and a surefire sign of a scam. Don’t listen to anyone trying to scare you into buying their services or product.

If you are concerned about elder or dependent adult financial abuse, call Sacramento County APS at (916) 874-9377. If you are the victim of a financial crime, always report it to law enforcement.

* Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation “Fraud Target: Senior Citizens”

For information about other Sacramento County services, please contact the Countywide Services Agency at (916) 874-4667 or visit www.csa.saccounty.net

RESOURCES

If you have been the victim of a scam, reach out to one of the following agencies:

- Sacramento County Adult Protective Services: 916-874-9377 or online at www.sacdhs.com
- Annual Credit Report (for free credit reports): 877-322-8228
- California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform: 800-474-1116
- California Attorney General’s Office Elder and Dependent Adult Abuse Reporting Hotline: 866-436-3600
- California Department of Consumer Affairs: 800-952-5210
- California Department of Corporations Seniors Against Investment Fraud: 866-275-2677
- Contractor’s State Licensing Board: 800-321-2752
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (<http://www.fbi.gov/majcases/fraud/seniorsfam.htm>)