Jamaican Lottery Scam Targets America’s Seniors

The Jamaican lottery scam is one of the biggest scams targeting the elderly in the U.S. Victims have lost millions of dollars to Jamaican scammers who promise to deliver big winnings, and who often target the most vulnerable individuals in our society. This scam is so pervasive that the Senate Special Committee on Aging held a hearing on March 13, 2013 to find better ways to combat the crime.

The typical pitch in this scam goes like this. A scammer will call an elderly individual and say that the senior has won millions of dollars in the Jamaican lottery. The scammer will congratulate the victim and ask what he or she plans to do with the winnings. Then, it’s down to business. The scammer claims that before he can transfer the winnings, the senior must wire several thousand dollars in order to cover administrative fees and taxes. The scammer may call back several times asking for additional fees, claiming that the original wire transfer did not go through, or that the fees and taxes went up. However, no prize is ever transferred to the senior, and the victims aren’t sure who to contact to report that the crime has occurred.

In some of the more tragic cases, the victims are isolated, forgetful, or otherwise have trouble managing their own finances. In the Senate hearing, family members of two victims told how their parents each lost over $45,000 to these scammers. In one instance, the teller at the victim’s bank was the person to finally step in and stop payment to the crooks.

The most frustrating aspect of this crime is that it is currently extremely difficult to prosecute any of the scammers because they live outside of the U.S. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is the national law enforcement agency that investigates these crimes. ICE has partnered with Jamaican forces to combat the crime, but individual scammers have not been prosecuted because they cannot be extradited to the United States. Florida Senator Bill Nelson, who chairs the Special Committee on Aging, has pledged to coordinate with the Jamaican ambassador and the U.S. Attorney General to increase prosecutions, either in Jamaica or in the U.S.

Until extraditions and prosecutions increase, what can we do to deter and defend against this scam? One overarching theme of the hearing was a need for education, support, and counseling resources for victims and potential victims. The AARP offices in some states have established Fraud Fighter Call Centers to provide information and resources to vulnerable seniors. In addition, please keep the following points in mind if you think you have been targeted by this scam:
• **You can't win a lottery that you did not enter.** If you are contacted by someone who claims that you have won, and you can’t remember ever playing or entering the contest, it is most likely a scam. You can only win if you entered the game. And, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

• **It is illegal to play a foreign lottery.** Federal law prohibits U.S. citizens from playing foreign lotteries.

• **Never pay money to win money.** If you have won a legitimate contest or sweepstakes, you are not required to purchase or pay fees before receiving your winnings. That is why the terms of legitimate contests say, “No Purchase Necessary.” If someone asks you to purchase goods or wire money upfront before they can send you the prize, it is likely a scam.

• **You only pay taxes to the IRS.** The terms of the Jamaican lottery scam claim that winners must pay a certain amount up front to cover taxes on the winning. This is a dead giveaway of a scam. You only ever pay this type of tax to the IRS directly, and not to a third party.

• **Report this crime if it happens to you.** While it is currently difficult to prosecute this crime, you should still report it if you are contacted by a scammer. Start by filing a police report. No other investigation can occur until a police report is filed. You should also contact the Federal Trade Commission ([www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov)) to file a consumer complaint. Finally, contact your state’s Attorney General’s office and the local county consumer protection agency. These agencies are equipped to accept complaints and investigate the crime.

For more information on consumer fraud and scams, including helpful preventative tips and contact information for other community resources, contact Stetson University College of Law’s Elder Consumer Protection Program by e-mail at elderconsumers@law.stetson.edu, or by telephone at (727) 562-7888.