

FIGHTING SENIOR SCAMS

Nassau police get proactive to curtail thefts from elderly

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Nassau County Executive Laura Curran and Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder declared war Tuesday on the phone fraudsters, email scammers and other con artists who try to rip off senior citizens and other residents.

Nassau police say they received 138 reports of scams against the elderly in 2018, a 62 percent increase over the previous year. Police said they have received 44 such complaints this year through Tuesday, a 47 percent jump compared to the 30 complaints received during the same time period last year.

For that, officials kicked off a series of public forums at the Franklin Square Senior Center intended to educate seniors on how to protect themselves from swindlers who, in some cases, have stolen tens of thousands of dollars from Long Island victims. Curran and Ryder said officials plan to hold dozens of similar forums throughout the county in upcoming months and will make that information available on the NCPD Facebook page.

"There's been too many victims so far," Ryder told the nearly 100 people who attended Tuesday's forum. "Starting today, you will be a victim no more."

While NCPD said it cannot pinpoint the reason for the uptick in scams, police acknowledge that it is a low-risk, high-reward crime of opportunity.

Most of the people who attended Tuesday's forum raised their hands when Curran asked how many had received suspicious phone calls or emails promising riches — and demanding personal information, such as Social Security, credit card and bank routing numbers.

"Tell someone," the county executive said. "Call the police, call 911. Tell a relative. Don't be afraid and don't fall for it. We want to make sure you have the information you need to be safe and to

hold on to your hard-earned dollars." Police are also encouraging others who may have been scammed to come forward.

"Call 911. In the meantime, get a good description. Get a plate number," said Nassau police community affairs Officer Dan Johannessen. "We'll go through the neighborhood and see if we can find that guy."

The scams take many different forms, Johannessen said, but they all have the same goal: separating vulnerable people from their money.

Sometimes the con artists identify themselves as police officers or prosecutors and tell would-be victims they need to send money to bail loved ones from jail. Others claim to be IRS representatives or utility employees demanding money to settle outstanding bills.

Fraudsters told a 79-year-old Plainview man that he had won \$5.7 million in the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes, but he needed to pay thousands of dollars in taxes and fees before he could collect his prize, Nassau officials said earlier this month. Lenkeisha Bolton, 28, of Queens Village and Dimitri Blanchard, 26, of Baldwin are accused of stealing \$147,000 from the man, who has not been identified by authorities. Both are charged with third-degree grand larceny, fourth-degree criminal facilitation and fifth-degree conspiracy.

"Remember, if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is," Johannessen said.

Bolton's lawyer, Lloyd Jesse Nadel of Mineola, said his client has denied involvement in the scam. Blanchard's attorney, Andrew Constan Karpf of Huntington Station, did not immediately return a call for comment.

Nassau police arrested Frederick Espinal, 23, of the Bronx, in December after he allegedly scammed nearly \$65,000 from residents in Oceanside, Great Neck, Roslyn and Farmingdale. He faces four counts of third-degree larceny.



Nassau police Officer Dan Johannessen talks with seniors at a public forum. ■ Video: newsday.com/nassau

REPORTS OF SCAMS AGAINST THE ELDERLY IN NASSAU COUNTY

2015	2016	2017	2018	2019 (year to date)
109	104	83	138	44

RED FLAGS AND RIP-OFFS

- Police, prosecutors and lawyers will not demand payment for bail or legal fees over the phone and they will not accept gift cards or payment via MoneyGram, MoneyPak or Western Union.
- IRS officials will never call or email demanding immediate payment or threaten to call law-enforcement for an outstanding tax bill.

- Utility companies will not offer to come to your home to pick up cash for what they say are outstanding bills.
- Ask callers demanding money for bail or utility payments for their supervisor's contact information so you can determine if the call is legitimate.
- Verify information provided by callers — if a caller says a loved one is in jail and needs help, call that

- loved one to verify the information.
- Emails demanding personal information such as Social Security numbers, bank routing numbers and credit card information should be considered suspicious, especially if they are not addressed directly to the recipient.
- Don't believe promises of prizes. Don't provide personal information to anybody promising lottery or contest winnings.

Suffolk County police, meanwhile, said at a March 7 news conference that crooks are employing a phone scam that displays a caller ID that appears to be from a legitimate source, such as the Social Security Administration or PSEG Long Island. That encourages victims to trust — and send money — to thieves.

In a release Tuesday, Suffolk police also warned residents of a phone scam in which callers demand money and use "spoofing" software to make it appear

that the call is coming from a legitimate Suffolk County Police Department phone number.

Seniors are especially vulnerable because they are often unaware that personal information can be gleaned from social media and because they grew up in a more trusting era, officials said. Many victims are reluctant to report rip-offs because they are embarrassed.

Law enforcement officials say these are especially tough cases because the scam artists are

often based in Russia, China and other foreign countries. Even fraudsters based in the United States are tough to track, officials said, because they typically use untraceable phones.

Gladys Cohen, the president of the Franklin Square Senior Center, praised Curran and the Nassau cops for spreading the word on con artists.

"I've gotten the emails myself with letterheads that look just like the companies they say they are representing," she said.