

Cerritos Neighborhood Watch Report

December 2009

Hardening the Target

Beware of con artists impersonating government officials

A recent rash of scams involves con artists impersonating government officials.

Some con artists use the lure of a sweepstakes to convince consumers to send in money to claim a “prize” they’ve supposedly won. They tell consumers that the only thing that separates them from their “winnings” is a fee to cover the taxes or service charges. But as all too many scammed consumers now know, these winnings will never materialize.

In a new spin on the age-old sweepstakes scam, crooks are getting bolder, and are now using names of government agencies and legitimate phone numbers that mask their actual locations. Claiming to represent the “national consumer protection agency,” the non-existent National Sweepstakes Bureau, and even the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), they say that the delivery of the sweepstakes prize is being supervised by the supposed government agency.

These scammers then convince consumers to wire money to a foreign country — a commercial money transfer company like Western Union is usually suggested — to an agent of Lloyd’s of London or another well-known insurance company to ensure delivery of the “prize.” In fact, no insurance company is involved; con artists take the money and disappear.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information

to help consumers recognize, stop and/or avoid them.

The Federal Trade Commission offers the following precautions to avoid the sweepstakes scam:

- Don’t pay to collect sweepstakes winnings. Legitimate sweepstakes don’t require you to pay insurance, taxes or shipping and handling to collect your prize.
- Hold on to your money. Scammers pressure people to wire money through money transfer companies because wiring money is the same as sending cash. If you discover you’ve been scammed, the money’s gone, and there’s very little chance of recovery. Likewise, refuse any request to send a check or money order by overnight delivery or courier. Con artists recommend these services so they can get to your money before you realize you’ve been cheated.
- Realize that look-alikes are not the real thing. It is illegal for any promoter to lie about an affiliation with — or an endorsement by — a government agency or any other well-known organization. Disreputable companies sometimes use a variation of an official or nationally recognized name to try to confuse you and give you confidence in their offers. Insurance companies, including Lloyd’s of London, do not insure delivery of sweepstakes winnings.
- Phone numbers can deceive. Some con artists use Internet

technology when they call you, allowing them to disguise their area code. Although it may look like they’re calling from Washington, DC or your local area, they could be calling from anywhere in the world.

- Take control of the calls you receive. If you are being bothered by telemarketing calls, place your telephone number on the National Do Not Call Registry. To register on-line, visit www.donotcall.gov. To register by phone, call (888) 382-1222 from the phone number you wish to register. If your number has been on the National Do Not Call registry for at least 31 days and a telemarketer calls, or if you receive a call from someone trying to arrange for you to collect sweepstakes winnings, file a complaint with the FTC using the contact information above. Your complaint should include the date and time of the call and the name or phone number of the organization that called. Although scammers may call using a telephone number that disguises their location, law enforcement may be able to track the number to identify the caller. The FTC enters consumer complaints into the Consumer Sentinel Network, a secure on-line database and investigative tool used by hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the United States and abroad.

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Monthly Crime Summary: November 2009

There were 95 Part I felony crimes reported to the Cerritos Sheriff's Station in November, up slightly from 93 in October. Vehicle burglaries and vehicle thefts increased while robberies and residential burglaries remained the same. Patrol personnel handled a weekly average of 323 calls for service by the end of November.

Robberies

There were three robbery incidents investigated by Cerritos deputies in November, the same total as in October.

On Thursday, November 5 at 5 p.m. a male suspect stole clothing from a store in the Los Cerritos Center. When contacted by loss prevention personnel, the suspect fought and bit one victim but was eventually arrested.

The ex-husband of a female victim grabbed her purse and fled through a parking lot in the 13300 block of South Street on Tuesday, November 17 at 8:05 p.m. When the

victim screamed, an off-duty deputy noticed and detained the suspect.

Three male suspects stole baby formula from a retail store in the Towne Center on Saturday, November 21 at 11:04 a.m. As they were leaving and were confronted by loss prevention personnel, one of the suspects produced a baseball bat and started swinging it at the victims. All three suspects got away but the suspect that swung the bat was subsequently arrested by Cerritos detectives.

Residential Burglaries

Residential burglaries remained the same in November as they were in October, as 12 were reported. Open/unlocked doors or windows were used to gain access to seven of the homes. In addition, four doors or windows were pried open and one window was shattered. Credit cards, a shotgun, laptop computers, purses, cameras, TVs, jewelry and cash were taken. The 2009 weekly average in residential burglaries was

2.4 at the end of the month.

Vehicle Burglaries

Vehicle burglaries increased to 32 crimes in November, compared to 28 in October. Twenty-three of the November incidents occurred in high-volume commercial parking lots. Fifteen of the burglarized vehicles were SUVs. Stereo components were taken from six vehicles and a GPS unit was taken from one. Flashlights, CDs, clothes, backpacks, surgical gloves and cash were among the additional items reported stolen. The 2009 weekly average in vehicle burglaries is now 7.5.

Vehicle Thefts

Vehicle thefts rose from 11 in October to 20 in November. Seventeen vehicles were stolen from high-volume commercial parking lots. Six SUVs, seven Hondas, and a Toyota were stolen, in addition to cargo trailers and tractors. The new 2009 weekly average in vehicle thefts is 4.5.

Monitor your credit card and bank records

When checking your credit card and bank statements, pay particular attention to each recorded transaction and make sure that the information is correct. With the flurry of activity during the holidays, it may be easier to miss something that could reveal unauthorized use.

The Cerritos Sheriff's Station/Community Safety Center recommends that you scrutinize your bills each month or each time you access an account on-line. Remember that an annual credit report can be obtained for free. This is yet another method to spot unauthorized activities in time to fix your credit rating.

Create a home inventory this holiday season

Just after the holidays, it is a good time to update or create your home inventory. Take photos or videos of your valuable items, and list descriptions and serial numbers. If your home is burglarized, having a detailed inventory can help law enforcement identify stolen items and make insurance claims easier to file. Make sure things like TVs, DVD players, stereo equipment, cameras, camcorders, sports equipment, jewelry, silver, computers, home office equipment, and power tools are on the list. Check each item twice to ensure accuracy.

Prevent vehicle burglary by NEVER leaving any valuable items inside the passenger compartment of your vehicle.

If you absolutely must leave valuables in your vehicle, lock them in the trunk. However, if you own an SUV or pick-up truck, you do not have this option, and thieves know it!

Safety Contacts:
Community Safety Division -
(562) 916-1266
Sheriff's Station - (562) 860-0044



To join Cerritos Neighborhood Watch, call the Cerritos Sheriff's Station/Community Safety Center at (562) 916-1266.