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Online and offline, learn ways to protect yourself from swindlers



BY SHERYL NANCE-NASH
Special to Newsday

Rosa Thompson of Lakeview has learned to scam-proof herself. "You see on the news people getting taken in these scams, I don't want that to be me," says Thompson.

Building an armor against scammers

When you call Rosa Thompson, don't expect her to pick up on the first few rings. If she recognizes your voice on the answering machine, she'll pick up — otherwise, talk to the machine.

"I was spending all day running to the phone to get crazy calls, people saying they were from the IRS, or people begging for money from groups I never heard of. I had to start screening my calls, listening to what was being said before I answered," said Thompson, 77, a retiree in Lakeview. "You see on the news people getting taken in these scams, I don't want that to be me.

"I even get these calls on my cellphone. If I don't recognize the number, I don't pick up." Thompson is not being paranoid. Often there is someone on the other line with ill intentions, especially if you're a senior citizen. According to Det. Vincent Garcia of the Nassau County Police Department's public information office, from January through mid-July, there were 275 phone-scam reports, 145 of which involved senior citizens.

"Telephone, email and internet scams have increased over the past few years," said Anthony Viola, CPA and senior partner with KVLSM LLP, an accounting firm in Woodbury. "As technology gets more sophisticated, more people have seized the opportunity to try and scam people out of their money — particularly, unsuspecting senior citizens."

Tracey Kuczinski, editor of "The Senior Resource Guide" and a senior housing advocate in Northport, recently received a phone call from a client whose aunt almost got scammed out of \$10,000, but for the intervention of a smart aide who stepped in and got the caller's number and address. "I'm sure it was fake, but the aide called the police to let them know. The problem is getting bigger. Scammers only need one or two lonely people a day to make a killing!"

Not only are seniors targeted in real life, via the telephone, snail mail or the "repair guy" who shows up unannounced to fix something that hasn't been reported broken, predators stalk them online, too.

"Education is key. Seniors need to be able to spot a scam," Garcia said. Senior citizens have to understand how the game is played to separate folks from their hard-earned money, and there are strategies to avoid becoming a victim in person and online.

Sandie—who uses only her first name to protect her privacy—volunteers for Huntington-based SeniorNet LI by finances and other matters, says, "If you do not know them and have not called them to provide a service or product, DO NOT let them in your home.

"A uniform or ID does not necessarily mean they are who they say they are."

And what should people do if they have been scammed—or even avoided being scammed? As Nassau County Police Community Affairs Officer Dan Johannessen told a group of senior citizens gathered at a public forum in March at the Franklin Square Senior Center: "Call 911. In the meantime, get a good description. Get a plate number. We'll go through the neighborhood and see if we can find that guy."