

Peace Corps
Office of Inspector General (OIG)



Fraud Advisory

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Peace Corps Inspector General Warns the Agency and the General Public About a Telephone Scam Targeting Grandparents

OIG continues to receive information about scams targeting the families and friends of Peace Corps volunteers. The latest scam involves the alleged travel of a loved one in a foreign country who encounters an unforeseen hardship and needs money. It has been coined the “Grandmother Scam.”

OIG has previously advised former volunteers and staff members to be cautious about emails requesting money and to use diligence on social network sites, such as Facebook. Anyone can fall victim to a scam.

The Grandmother Scam

The Grandmother Scam has been around for years in the U.S. and Canada, and continues to be an effective because it preys on the emotions of a very trusting population – grandparents. The scam works like this:

A senior citizen, usually a grandmother, receives a phone call from a distressed person who they believe is their grandchild. The supposed grandchild typically explains that they are travelling overseas and have been arrested or involved in an auto accident, and they need the grandparent to wire money to post bail or pay for damages—usually amounting to a few thousand dollars. The caller also requests that the grandparent not contact the traveler’s parents, because it will cause the grandchild more problems. The grandparent is urged to quickly send money.

Law enforcement officials are not certain how perpetrators are obtaining phone numbers for so many senior citizens across the U.S. However, it is believed that scammers are most likely calling random numbers until they happen to reach a senior citizen. The scammers' basic tactic is to pose as a grandchild and let the unsuspecting grandparent fill in the blanks. For example, the scam caller might say, "It's me, your favorite grandchild" or "Grandma, guess who this is," to which the grandparent will provide the name of the grandchild it sounds the most like, and then the scam proceeds from there.

In some cases, two persons are involved in the scam and will claim to be a defense attorney for the person in jail, a jail administrator who is ready to accept a credit card number for bail payment, or a police officer ready to verify the damage caused by the auto accident. In all cases, the calls have an urgent tone and seek the immediate transfer of funds by credit card, Western Union or MoneyGram.

A family member or friend who receives this type of telephone call should confirm the status of the traveler (whether or not he or she is a volunteer) by calling them directly or verifying the story with other family members before taking any further action. Additionally, any request to wire money through Western Union or MoneyGram should be seen as a "red flag" and an immediate tip-off that the call may be part of a fraud. Funds sent via wire transfer are hard to track once received by scammers and are usually not recoverable by law enforcement or banking officials.

Practical Tips

- If you receive a similar notice and are unsure whether or not it is a scam, you should always verify the information before sending any money, and ignore the claimed "urgency" of the request.
- Always secure email login and password information, and never provide this information to anyone (even the website where the login and password are used).
- Read messages carefully for possible errors in grammar, including spelling and punctuations, as well as suspicious content of the facts surrounding the request.

And remember, if the traveling "victim" is a currently serving Peace Corps volunteer, he or she would not likely be contacting you for money. In the event of a travel emergency, volunteers have been instructed to contact Peace Corps, or in appropriate circumstances, the U.S. Embassy for assistance.

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