

ELDER LAW FIGHTS CONSUMER FRAUD

“Congratulations, you have just won the Canadian Lottery.”

“We are writing to ask your assistance in recovering a large amount of money.”

If you have ever received a telephone call or computer message like this and have responded, you are on your way to becoming a crime victim. Each year American consumers lose more than 40 billion dollars to fraud. How does it happen?

American consumers are spenders. We buy, buy and then buy some more. If you have ever purchased a car, shopped at a local store, given to a large charity, or ordered a magazine, your name is on a consumer list. These consumer lists are then sold and resold to both legal and illegal telemarketers. Computer thieves break into business data banks and sift through dumpsters to illegally obtain millions of names and



personal data. These financial thieves target victims, particularly older consumers, from every culture, race and economic group. They are looking for access to your money or your personal information such as your date of birth, social security number, credit card number or bank account number. Older consumers are frequently more vulnerable because they have established a history of good credit—a credit history worth stealing.

How do we fight fraud? One key component is consumer education. Elder Law of Michigan, a Lansing based non-profit organization, has been providing free legal services to older adults in Michigan since 1990 through its Legal Hotline for Michigan Seniors. It was a natural fit for Elder Law to establish the Consumer Fraud Prevention Project, created in early 2007, to provide consumer fraud information and prevention tips to older consumers. Fraudulent telemarketers use an operation called a “boiler room” to make contact with their victims. The boiler room is often nothing more than a bare office with a bank of telephones. The Consumer Fraud Prevention Project, using a similar approach, is a “reverse boiler room.” Older adult volunteers from the greater Lansing area telephone senior consumers across the country to share fraud information and offer suggestions on how to counter telemarketers. One consumer, Sue in South Carolina, recently told a

volunteer “Well, I really appreciate finally receiving a call to help me.

Thank you for calling.”

Consumer Fraud Prevention Project volunteers are making a difference every day by giving some of their free time to warn their peers from all over the United States about current scams and providing tips and information on how to protect themselves from telemarketing fraud. “Our volunteers love talking to people and after each shift on the telephone they feel like they have really helped. There are a lot of people who don’t realize how easy it is for crooks to take your money or identity. Helping people prevent financial and emotional losses is a wonderful feeling,” said Ron Tatro, Consumer Fraud Project Director. “We always need more volunteers to join us. The training is short and we make it fun. We have a great time at the Consumer Fraud Project and we are doing really important work for older adults. If you know anyone in the Lansing area who might be interested in becoming a volunteer, have them call our number,” Tatro added.

So, what should you do if you are receiving telemarketing calls? Elder Law of Michigan offers these basic rules. 1. Immediately hang up. Never share any personal or financial information with anyone over the telephone. 2. If

you receive something in the mail that contains personal information, shred it. 3. Be cautious. When in doubt, question the caller. Request to be put on their “do not call list.” You can be placed on the National Do Not Call Registry by calling (888) 382-1222. You must call from the phone number you wish to register. 4. If you still have questions, contact the Michigan Attorney General’s office at 1-517-373-1110. You can also obtain information about telemarketing and unfair sales practices by calling the Legal Hotline for Michigan Seniors at (800) 347-5297.

Remember, when presented with a plausible fraud or scam delivered by the right person, all of us have the potential to become a fraud victim. Be wary of “easy money” and “get rich quick” schemes that sound too good to be true. Be an informed consumer and protect your assets. If you would like to speak to someone about fraud prevention information or volunteer opportunities, call 517-853-2398 or 1-888-200-4943.

