



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

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News Release

ICE RETURNS \$2,000 TO OKLAHOMA CITY SCAM VICTIM

Special agent warns of telemarketing scams

OKLAHOMA CITY—Special agents with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) here today returned \$2,000 to an Oklahoma City man victimized by telemarketing con artists operating from Canada.

The money --a fraction of what was scammed-- was recovered by Project COLT investigators, a multi-agency joint U.S.-Canada initiative targeting telemarketing fraud by ICE, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the FBI, and the U.S. Postal Service Inspection Service.

Mike Arnold, resident agent-in-charge of the ICE office in Oklahoma City, issued a warning that Oklahoma residents should be vigilant about such scams, which have already bilked people -- especially senior citizens -- in the United States out of tens of millions of dollars.

Arnold said that in the past two years the Oklahoma City ICE office has returned more than \$32,000 to eight different Oklahoma victims of such scams. These same eight victims however, had sent nearly \$170,000 to these con artists.

“Most people are usually not lucky enough to get all their money back; a lucky few get part of it returned,” said Arnold. “ICE agents will do everything they can to stop this criminal enterprise, but the first line of defense is for people to be wary of people calling and asking them to send money.”

“There’s no such thing as free money,” said Arnold. “These con artists are very believable. They pass themselves off as trustworthy, and are persistent until they get as much money as possible from their victims. Before sending a single cent, make the toll-free call to Project COLT’s hotline at: 888-495-8501, or call ICE at: 405-605-1120.”

Arnold said that telemarketing scams are prevalent and take on various forms. It has been a well-documented scam in which people from across the United States received calls from someone claiming to be a “customs agent” located along the U.S.-Canada border. The caller claimed that the intended victim had won the Canadian lottery and that a check for a large dollar amount was being held at the border. The con artist would then request a “processing fee” or “customs duty” be wired or mailed before the check could be released.

This scam is particularly sophisticated in that intended victims are often given a call-back telephone number in Fargo, N.D., adding credibility to the ruse. In reality, calls made to the Fargo number were electronically routed to the con artists in Canada.

Those who run telemarketing schemes are highly skilled, and even the skeptical can fall victim. In August 2003, ICE Special Agent-in-Charge Robert Gattison in Tucson returned \$14,620 to a retired Army brigadier general. The 86-year-old Tucson resident had been victimized in a version of the long-running telemarketing scam. A law enforcement investigation resulted in the recovery of the general’s money.

Telemarketing fraud, which primarily targets elderly victims in the United States, has resulted in the loss of tens of millions of dollars by people who are least able to recover from financial loss. Victims often lose their entire life savings. Fraudulent telemarketers represent themselves to victims as lawyers, government officials, police officers, accountants or lottery company officials. The victims are told that they will receive a sum of money varying from thousands to millions of dollars in lottery winnings.

Since 1998, the Project COLT joint initiative has included agents from the following organizations: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), FBI, U.S. Postal Inspectors, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Surete du Quebec (SQ), and Montreal Urban Community Police (MUC). The focus of Project COLT is to identify, disrupt, and dismantle telemarketing fraud operations. Project COLT is a unit consisting of law enforcement officers who intercept funds (usually bank drafts and cashiers' checks), so they can be recovered and ultimately returned to victims. Project COLT Officers also work to prevent further victimization both through public education and the prosecution of those who commit the fraud.

Project COLT members also have formed partnerships with Canada Customs and Revenue, Canada Post Corporation, Federal Express, Purolator, United Parcel Service, DHL and other companies to assist with fund interception and return.

Project COLT Web Site: http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/qc/pro_ser/delits_e.htm

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.