

Watchwords by Officer Tom Hanshaw
January 27, 2012

A few weeks ago, I attended the monthly, “Coffee with the Chiefs Hour” at the Senior Drop-In Center and spoke with the crowd about current happenings. One of the topics we discussed was the number of scams popping up through the Internet and mail. A refreshing observation I made, however, was the number of people who have learned to recognize these offers as scams. In fact, I chuckled many times at the comments shared about the perpetrators. Although con artists are still very active in the scam business, there are certainly fewer victims in our community.

Many of these scams have patterns, warning signs and offers too good to be true. It’s important to recognize the signs and take steps to protect your money, because it doesn’t take long to lose it. Sadly, the odds of recovering anything if victimized are slim. Most of the incidents are originating from outside the US, hence the Western Union connection. Common warning signs sent with correspondence include poor English, grammar, references to legitimate organizations and the lure of easy money. This week I’d like to share some information about an opportunity offered to a resident, who brought the materials in for me to see. Fortunately he did not take the bait when it was offered and did not lose any money.

“Secret or Mystery Shopper Scams” have become very popular with con artists. Here’s how it works; you receive an offer to visit various businesses and make purchases. You’re then asked to complete an evaluation form and provide input to a company hired to measure customer service. In appreciation of your contributions to the service and the businesses you visited, you are eligible for a cash reward. Sounds good, hey who doesn’t want to be paid to go shopping! Once again, though, it sounds like something that seems too good to be true.

In this case, the Amesbury resident who was contacted actually looked online for information about “Mystery Shopping.” He was then contacted by two agencies and mailed some very official looking materials. In comparing the two, the cover letters were almost identical, complete with warnings about providing personal information to strangers. One even had several logos of well-known companies along the bottom of the page. Accompanying the letters, which arrived via UPS, were bank checks for \$1997.58 (2) and \$1306.58 (3). The resident had been promised a pay of \$200.00 per store he evaluated. A series of instructions were provided, asking him to deposit the checks immediately into his bank account and to then advise his campaign coordinator thereafter. This is how the scam gets going.

A victim of such a scam is then told he or she was overpaid and asked to send the extra money back to the group, in this case “Dell Consumer Research Group” and “Alutech United.” In order to assure no disruption to the business opportunity, they are asked to send the funds back through Western Union, which allows anyone to pick up the money, anywhere in the world. Since the checks received by the victim were bogus, the money is taken from the actual funds in his or her account. If there are no funds to cover the withdrawal, the customer is then responsible for returning funds to the bank. Since the customer is responsible for deposits, you are also responsible for the loss. In this case had the resident deposited the checks and returned the overpayment, he could have lost thousands of dollars.

In closing this week, I'd like to extend congratulations and best wishes to Officer Gary Wright, who retired from the Police Department last week. Gary began his career in Amesbury as an Auxiliary Police Officer in 1975 and became a Permanent Officer in 1977. In fact, Gary is the last officer with the police force who began in the 1970s. Over his years of service, Gary has been involved in many incidents and saw many changes to the profession, as police work today differs greatly from the 1970s. Chief Gagnon hosted a small reception for Gary in appreciation of his years of dedicated service to the community, where officers were able to wish him well. I've worked with Gary since 1983, when I began as an Auxiliary Officer and shared many shifts together along the way. Gary's veteran presence and experience will surely be missed, as will his great sense of humor around the Station. He will be staying around to work a few details as well as contributing to the community policing service in Amesbury. In case you're looking for a treat this summer, be sure to visit his Ice Cream Shoppe in Stratham NH, "Just the Wright Place." Thanks again to Gary for congratulations on an assignment well done.