

How to protect grandma from getting conned

Jay Grossman, hometownlife.com

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(Photo: Wayne State University)

An 87-year-old resident in Birmingham gives \$30,000 to a stranger who offers to fix her computer that isn't broken.

An 81-year-old resident in Wayne gives \$43,000 to a stranger who claims to be from the U.S. Department of Justice.

An elderly resident from Bloomfield Township is tricked into sending \$1,950 to a stranger who claims to be an attorney representing her grandson.

One of out every 20 older adults is a victim of fraud, according to the Department of Justice. Con artists are getting away with thousands of dollars in these financial scams and, in most cases, the money is almost impossible to recover.

Farmington resident Peter Lichtenberg, director of the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University, has come up with a tool to protect the elderly

against scams, in the form of a comprehensive assessment test that helps determine if a person is at-risk to make poor financial decisions.

"We developed this test to look at decisions that older individuals are making and how informed they are in making them," Lichtenberg said. "Without informed decision-making, people get themselves in a lot of trouble."

His screenings and evaluations include a long-form interview for mental health professionals to fully assess a person's capacity and a condensed version for financial services professionals, lawyers, law enforcement officers and adult protective services employees.

The screenings assess an older adult's financial judgment and measures the person's vulnerability to thefts and scams. It determines how vulnerable a person is to outside influences and whether the person understood the consequences of the financial decision.

Lichtenberg said crimes against older adults are under reported, mainly because the victims are too embarrassed to say anything. And women are typically targeted more than men (<https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/mmi/publications/studies/2011/mmi-elder-financial-abuse.pdf>).

"Mom doesn't feel like a strong parent anymore and adult children don't feel like they're honoring their parent if they can't get through and protect them," he said. "So it's a very difficult dance. I think people have to find a way to be direct, but not confrontational."

Related:

Police: Woman pays con artist 30K

(<http://www.hometownlife.com/story/news/2017/04/07/police-woman-pays-con-artist-30k-fix-her-computer/100128584/>)

Woman out \$43,000 in iTunes scam

(<http://www.hometownlife.com/story/news/local/westland/2017/04/12/woman-out-43000-itunes-scam/100340780/>)

Woman tricked into thinking grandson in jail

(<http://www.hometownlife.com/story/news/2017/04/10/police-woman-tricked-into-thinking-grandson-jail/100286568/>)

Along similar lines, Lichtenberg said professionals in the financial services industry oftentimes have clients whose ability to make financial decisions may be diminishing as they get older. It puts the professional in a precarious position in trying to protect the older adult from being financially exploited by a stranger — or a family member.

In January, the Institute of Gerontology launched a new program called SAFE (Success after Financial Exploitation) to provide free one-on-one assistance to anyone 50 or older who was a victim of a financial scam or identity theft. SAFE also provides free workshops and presentations to increase financial literacy in older adults and help them spot scams and protect themselves.

"A lot of that is making sure their credit is restored and whatever else we can do to help them get back on financial footing," he said.

Lichtenberg is working with adult service professionals in a number of states to offer the services. A mobile web version will soon go live, where professionals can access the screening tools and have them scored.

Lichtenberg said the testing can be done at the university or in a person's home — wherever is most comfortable. Anyone interested in learning more about the screening can call 313-577-2297 or go to the WSU Institute of Gerontology online at www.iog.wayne.edu (<http://www.iog.wayne.edu>).

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