



Plan Ahead to Avoid Grandparent Scams

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MADISON – Throughout the state, Wisconsin students and families are in search of sunshine and relaxation. But for relatives holding down the fort back home, spring break could bring an increased risk of grandparent scam attempts (also known as “family emergency scams”).

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) asks spring break travelers to privately share their travel itineraries with their relatives and to develop a family plan for dealing with these threatening and frightening calls.

How the grandparent scam works: a fraudster calls a potential victim out of the blue and claims to be a relative (often a grandchild) that is in a bind and in immediate need of money. The scammers often claim that they are traveling abroad and were arrested or in an accident. They need money wired immediately (or need the numbers from a prepaid debit card) in order to get out of jail, to be discharged from a hospital, or to pay some other legal fees. The scammer asks the potential victim to keep the call a secret from law enforcement and from other relatives.

“Since the start of the year, DATCP has averaged at least one report each week from a Wisconsin consumer who was targeted in a grandparent scam,” said Lara Sutherlin, administrator for the Division of Trade and Consumer Protection. “Given the number of Wisconsinites traveling over spring break, we are concerned that scammers may see this as an opening to ramp up these threatening calls to family members back home.”

The best way to combat these callers is to develop a family plan. This simple and important tool can help relatives detect the legitimacy of an emergency phone call and give them tools to check the status of the traveler. A family plan should consist of:

- A travel itinerary that includes contact information for accommodations or transportation services,
- A plan for regular, quick check-ins,
- A code word or phrase that would be expected in any true emergency call, and
- Open family communication to verify the safety of the family member.

If you receive a potentially fraudulent emergency phone call, DATCP offers these tips:

- Resist the pressure to act immediately.
- Do not wire money to strangers or provide your bank or credit card account numbers.
- Do not give out any personal information or confirm anything that is told to you.
- If you cannot reach a family member and are unsure of what to do, call the Bureau of Consumer Protection (800-422-7128) or your local police on their non-emergency line.
- Remember that this scam is not exclusively dependent upon the grandparent/grandchild relationship – scammers could also claim to be a different relative (a niece or nephew, for example) or a family friend.

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