

Spring Breakers: Fight Grandparent Scams with a Family Plan

Release Date: March 12, 2018

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MADISON – Spring break may be a time for students and families to get away and relax, but it is also a time for relatives to be on guard. Given the number of people on the go, spring break presents a unique opportunity for scammers to pitch family emergency scams (better known as “grandparent scams”) to loved ones back home.

In a family emergency scam, a scammer calls potential victims impersonating a desperate relative (typically a grandchild) in need of money due to a (phony) emergency. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) asks spring break travelers to talk with their relatives about their travel itineraries and to develop a family plan for dealing with the threat of fake emergency phone calls.

“Consumers are reporting that the scammers have already started making grandparent scam calls in Wisconsin,” said Michelle Reinen, Director of the Bureau of Consumer Protection. “A common theme among those who report failed grandparent scam attempts is that they disregarded the crook’s demand for secrecy and immediately made a follow-up call to the grandchild in question or that child’s parent.”

Another 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. 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 student.

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.

For additional information, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at <http://datcp.wi.gov>, send an e-mail to datcp hotline@wisconsin.gov or call the Consumer Protection Hotline at 1-800-422-7128.

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