

Police boost awareness in March as Fraud Prevention Month

By Tim Whitnell
Metroland Media Group

Doug Armstrong is getting tired of attempts to separate him from his money.

The Burlington resident says he and his wife, Lois, receive at least three automated phone calls per week from some entity claiming, in generic terms, the couple has significant credit card debt and that they can help them handle it.

He just hangs up.

The boiling point for the Armstrongs, both in their 80s, came late last week.

Armstrong says they received four recorded phone messages, each two hours apart, last Friday each stating, forcefully, that they owed the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) for income tax arrears.

Armstrong says that he knows they have no such financial trouble.

"They were threatening," he said of the recorded messages. "It was the same person (voice) and it was definitely scripted with the same message."

Armstrong said each call concluded with the threat that if they didn't call a provided phone number, to arrange for payment, a collection agent would show up at their home within 24 hours.

A quick search online of the number the recorded message told them to call, which begins with an 844 area code, leads to sites that have messages from people who say they have had similar experiences to the Armstrongs with supposed contact by

the CRA about taxes owing.

The CRA website has a warning about "... an ongoing scam in which taxpayers across the country receive phone calls or emails from individuals impersonating CRA employees. These people are scammers..."

"I can see a lot of seniors like us being taken in by it," Armstrong said.

Except they weren't.

After the second automated call Armstrong picked up the phone himself and called Halton Regional Police. He says he talked to a civilian member of the service who listened to him and then suggested he call the RCMP.

However, the next call Armstrong said he made was to Burlington MPP Eleanor McMahon's office. Someone there told him to call the Ontario Provincial Police anti-fraud hotline. He did, but a long wait on the line prompted him to hang up.

Armstrong knows what he'd like to do if a live caller ever tried to scam him.

"The language I couldn't repeat. I'd probably say a few choice words and then hang up."

Det.-Sgt. Troy Izlakar, head of Halton police's Regional Fraud Unit, says he anticipates CRA scam attempts will increase as the tax season filing deadline of April 30 nears.

March is Fraud Prevention Month and Halton Regional Police is using the occasion to encourage residents to recognize, reject and report fraud.

Fraud Prevention Month is a collective effort that brings to-

gether 125 law enforcement agencies, public and private sector organizations to combat the crime.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Competition Bureau of Canada are joining police services across the country to promote public awareness to help prevent fraud, which thousands of Canadians fall victim to each year with losses in the millions of dollars.

"In Halton Region, we do experience victimization of certain types of scams and frauds, particularly to our senior population," said Izlakar.

"In a community with an aging population and a higher than average disposable income, it makes this area very attractive to fraudsters."

"By phone and Internet is more popular (now)," rather than the traditional door-to-door utilities scammers, Izlakar said of trends in how fraudsters approach the public.

Police are encouraging adult children of senior parents or relatives to take the time and know why, where and to whom their elderly parents are sending money.

"These fraudsters are very convincing and will confuse a senior into sending them a small fortune before their children can intervene," said Izlakar.

"I cannot stress enough, never send funds by means of a wire transfer to anyone you're not familiar with; anyone wanting you to send them money via wire transfer is a sure bet fraudster."

Police said in the majority of cases, funds scammed from seniors are sent by wire transfer to



Halton Police have increased efforts to stop all forms of fraud in the community, starting with educating the public.

a Third World country, making it almost impossible to trace or recover.

During the month of March, Halton police will be engaging with external organizations and be diligent on social media with the goal of increasing social awareness to a variety of frauds and scams that are currently widespread.

"During my time in this unit, I have been witness to some pretty devastating financial fraud, predominantly to seniors," said Izlakar.

"Day to day, people don't think about fraud until it happens to them or a family member and that really needs to change; hopefully this month we may grab the attention of some people."

Ontario Provincial Police is also promoting Fraud Prevention Month with a media campaign focussing on five topics:

- Emergency or Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) scams
- Romance scam
- Microsoft/computer scams

- Phishing or Bank website scams
- Lottery scams

"Whether it is vulnerable citizens cheated out of their life savings or young people stripped of their assets and forced to start over, the harm caused by all types of fraud is staggering. The money taken is used to fuel other illegal activities, causing further harm to society as a whole," OPP Commissioner Vince Hawkes said in a press release.

If you or someone you know suspect they've been a victim of fraud, contact your local police service, the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre, Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477 (TIPS) or go online at <https://www.tipsubmit.com/start.htm>.

For more information on fraud prevention, visit www.competitionbureau.gc.ca or www.anti-fraudcentre-centreantifraude.ca or www.bbb.org/scamtracker.

— with files from David Lea, Oakville Beaver

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