New Tax Laws Leave Filers Vulnerable To Scammers

Local Seniors vs. Crime offices have tips to protect against tax scams.

By PHILL STUART
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It's tax time. That means people will be making big plans for their tax refunds.

It also provides fertile ground for scammers.

This year, because of recent changes to tax laws and tax forms, the Federal Trade Commission expects to see more people being targeted by and falling victim to IRS scams.

In the scam, criminals impersonate IRS agents and claim the victim owes money.

Bryan Lifsey, office manager for Sumter County Seniors vs. Crime, said people who do their own taxes are particularly vulnerable.

"All the things that you're used to are gone," he said. "All the forms have changed. The 1040s are gone. If you do it on your own, it will be unfamiliar to you."

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Seniors vs. Crime expects to see a lot of phone calls coming in as more and more people file their taxes. Fruitland Park Seniors vs. Crime office manager, John Townley, has already been getting calls from people about the IRS scam.

"Most of them, people seem to be aware it's a scam, but they just want to make sure," he said. "When someone says IRS, you get nervous. They want to report it and see if there's anything we can do to stop it."

But some people still fall victim.

"Some people are simply too trusting," Townley said. "It may be more a problem with seniors. It's also a natural reaction to panic when it's the IRS. It's like when you're driving down the road and you see a cop behind you. You know you're not speeding, but you still kind of drive more cautiously. I think it's a fairly typical reaction."

JOHN TOWNLEY,
Fruitland Park Seniors vs Crime Office Manager
messages that often include threats," he said. "They say if you don't call us tonight, we're going to send the sheriff to your home to arrest you. If you call the sheriff though, they'll tell you, 'No. We don't do arrests for the IRS.'"

The scammers then want you to call them. "Part of their goal is to keep you on the phone," Townley said. "They think that if they can gain your confidence, they can get some of your money."

But he said there are ways you can spot fakers. "Number one, the IRS is typically not going to call you," he said. "Number two, the IRS never asks you to go buy iTunes cards or Target gift cards or anything like that and send them in."

Lifsey said the IRS will usually send you a letter in the mail, or in extreme cases, come to your house. Their preferred method of payment is a check made out to the U.S. Treasury, not to the IRS.

"I've seen in the past where people say make the check out to the IRS, which sounds legitimate," Lifsey said. "When they get the check, they have a company whose initials just happen to be I-R-S, let's just say it's Irrigation Radiation Services or whatever, so they can cash or deposit the check and get it out of the country."

Townley said the best defense against these scammers is just to not engage with them.

"My wife and I, if we don't recognize the number, we don't answer the phone," he said. "If it's important, they'll leave a message."

Townley said that if you receive a call, even if you didn't lose any money, you should still report it to Seniors vs. Crime so they can track when these scams are happening. If you have lost money, however, report it to law enforcement.

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