

The Fearless Consumer

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Latest column

Seniors, Beware: Scammers Want Your \$\$\$

Craig Brunell is at his wits' end. His 91-year-old mother was "hit hard and heavy" last October by scammers who offered to sell her new cars at next to nothing; she only needed to pay for minor things like title fees. Alas, no cars materialized; only more requests to pay various fees.

Brunell, who lives in Topeka, KS—about two hours from his mother—emailed his account of the chaos that ensued. "In early February," he wrote, "10 to 15 banking institutions in her local area began calling to say my mother was covering lots of ground in a four-county area 'with her hair afire,'" as one caller described her. She had so aggravated the banks she dealt with that all but one had closed her accounts and refused her business. The president of the remaining bank is a close friend of Brunell's, and the two are attempting to limit the damage as much as possible.

That's proven to be a Herculean task. Brunell is in the process of becoming his mother's conservator, which requires the involvement of her doctor and the Kansas State Department of Elder Abuse. He's also removed her landline phones, changed her cell phone number twice, arranged to have all mail except for newspapers and magazines forwarded to him, and taken charge of paying her bills. Meanwhile, he says, she's promising to behave "and lying through her dentures about how much

she may have sent the crooks.” His best estimate is that since last October, “she’s dumped about \$80,000 down the rat hole.”

Brunell’s story brought back some painful memories of my own. In the last two years or so of my stepmother’s life, she wrote checks worth \$330,000 to three people who worked at a care center in Sun City West, AZ. She was grateful to them for having taken care of her older sister, who had been a resident of the care center for several years—and as my stepmother slipped into cognitive decline, she became easier to get money out of.

Thankfully, my sister had power of attorney, and when she discovered what was going on she confronted all three and reported them to the care center, whose employees are expressly forbidden from accepting money from residents or their families. Obviously, that policy was easy to ignore for at least three of their employees, and I suspect for many more.

If you’re concerned about potential financial abuse, either of yourself or a family member or friend, I recommend two resources. The first is the American Bankers Association website, www.aba.com, which has lots of information and tips on a broad range of topics.

I’m well acquainted with the second resource because, as a freelance academic editor, I’ve worked for a number of years with Peter Lichtenberg at Wayne State University. Lichtenberg is the Director of the Institute of Gerontology and Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute at Wayne State, and has conducted extensive research on elder financial abuse. Based on the results, he created three tools for determining whether an elder has been, or is at risk of becoming, the victim of undue influence in financial matters. The tools are available, along with links to his research and other resources, at www.olderadultnestegg.com.

The first tool, the Financial Decision Tracker, is for “professionals who work with older adults making significant financial decisions, including attorneys, financial planners, bankers, investment brokers, insurance agents, accountants, law enforcement officers, and Adult Protective Services case workers.” It consists of a 10-question interview that takes about 10 minutes.

The Financial Vulnerability Assessment is for “mental health professionals who are well trained in administering standardized tests, including psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, therapists, counselors, nurse practitioners and pastoral counselors.” This is an in-depth interview, and takes 20-25 minutes.

The Family & Friends Interview “seeks to understand an older adult’s recent financial decision by interviewing a trusted relative, friend or professional acquaintance of the older adult” — ideally, someone “who would not benefit from the older adult’s financial decision.” The interview takes about 10 minutes, and is best used in combination with one of the other tools. All three tools require training, which is accessible online.

According to Lichtenberg’s website, “one in every 20 adults in the U.S. is a victim of financial exploitation, losing an average of \$80,000 to \$186,000.” That puts Brunell’s mother at the low end of the range. I’m hoping she won’t go higher — or, more precisely, that she won’t go deeper.

Have you had a problem with a business you couldn’t resolve? I might be able to help. E-mail me at fearlessconsumer@gmail.com, visit my website at fearlessconsumer.com.



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