

## Consumers Warned of Obamacare Scams

By: Michael Kling

If you get a phone call from someone who claims they're from the government and urges you to sign up for healthcare insurance, the odds are that it's a scam. Cons and schemes relating to the Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare, have mushroomed as the health insurance law has rolled out.

Criminals have been calling people, knocking on doors, sending emails, and creating fake websites, attempting to collect sensitive financial information to commit identity theft, collect bogus sign-up fees, or sell worthless insurance.

"Malicious identity theft is the common thread that runs through all the Obamacare cons committed against consumers," said James Quiggle, director of communications with the nonprofit Coalition Against Insurance Fraud.

"The bulk of the Obamacare scams have involved people cold calling, lying that they're the Feds and warning people that health reform requires them to have a new national medical card or else they're violating federal law and will possibly go to jail."

The con artists ask for Social Security numbers, birthdays, bank account numbers, and other information – exactly what they need to steal identities and ruin people financially. Seniors – whom criminals view as uninformed and overly trusting – are frequently targeted even though they already have Medicare and are not impacted by the health care law.

Consumer advocates recommend politely hanging up if you get such a phone call. Federal officials are not cold calling consumers and are not requesting financial information over the phone.

Intimidation is the main tool of the con artists, Quiggle said. Health care navigators, trained to help people sign up for health care, are not supposed to push particular products or collect financial data. "If navigators start getting pushy and insist you must sign up now and demand financial identifiers, that's a clear warning sign," said Quiggle.

Depending on the prosecutor, he said, apprehended swindlers may face charges for wire fraud, identity theft, computer fraud if a computer was involved, health care fraud if insurance numbers are used for treatment, and racketeering if prosecutors find an organized pattern of crime.

The scams will likely increase as the law's March 31 open enrollment deadline approaches but certainly won't disappear after that date, since

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scam artists will continually devise new schemes, experts warn.

Pervasive confusion over the law and earlier uncertainty about possible legislative changes have been major problems, said Howard Schwartz, executive communications director with the Connecticut Better Business Bureau. "People become vulnerable and become frightened into action," he said.

Consumers should hang up and do their own research rather than talking to someone who calls them on the phone, he said. "Education on the part of consumers is the single greatest tool against getting scammed."

Scam artists are sending emails urging people to sign-up for health care but clicking on their links can infect computers with malware, Schwartz warned. With a single click on a link, a computer, phone, and other devices can become infected. The malware can follow the computer user, collecting user names and passwords.

Computer users can hover their mouse over the link to view its real address. They can also type the address into their computer rather than clicking on a suspicious link.

Some websites and phone calls are overly aggressive sales efforts rather than maliciously criminal acts, experts said. Still, they may violate state deceptive advertising laws.