

Scammers using Affordable Care Act to pry out information

By: Gitte Laasby, Journal Sentinel

Scammers are trying to lure consumers into giving up their personal information by claiming they have been selected to be among the first to receive insurance cards through the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. In reality, the scammers just want enough information to commit identity theft.

"They're blatant ploys to steal your financial information and loot your bank accounts," said Jim Quiggle, a spokesman for the organization Coalition Against Insurance Fraud.

The federal government and several consumer organizations warn that people nationwide, especially seniors, have been receiving scam phone calls from slick salespeople, sometimes posing as federal government workers. The solicitors tell people they are eligible for national health reform insurance cards and that they just need to give out some personal information to get signed up, according to the Federal Trade Commission and the Better Business Bureau.

The BBB said callers typically ask for bank account and Social Security numbers.

"We've heard from consumers and from other federal agencies that scammers are trying to convince people to act now," the FTC said in a warning. "Scammers always want to get your money before you have time to stop and think."

Some scammers have been brazen enough to tell people they will go to jail unless they sign up right away, Quiggle said.

One reason scammers are able to con people is that many consumers know little about the Affordable Care Act. An April health tracking poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation showed 42% of people surveyed didn't know it's the law. Uninsured people and those with lower incomes - whom the law was designed to help the most - were less likely to have learned about the law than those of higher income who already have insurance.

"Confusion is a scammer's best friend," Quiggle said in an email. "The less people know about health reform, the more con artists can exploit that knowledge gap. Swindlers will slap the word 'Obamacare' onto the scheme to try and convince people to hand over their sensitive financial information."

The so-called Obamacare cons often target seniors because they presume seniors are easily fooled and have tidy savings to steal from, and

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because they are usually home to answer the phone or door, he said.

The BBB emphasized that there is no enrollment and no insurance card until Oct. 1. Coverage is scheduled to begin Jan. 1.

"Sharing personal information with a scammer puts you at risk for identity theft," the BBB said. "Scammers can use the info they obtain to open credit cards in your name or steal from your bank account."

Jerad Albracht, a spokesman for the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, said his department has not received any complaints about scams involving the Affordable Care Act, but that the scam sounds similar to Medicare-related scams. In those, scammers also often try to trick seniors into turning over personal information by telling them that they need a new Medicare card.

A few tips in case you get a scam call like these:

- Hang up. Don't engage the caller in conversation, don't press buttons to talk to someone and don't return their call. This just confirms to scammers that they have a working number.
- Be cautious if anyone calls, texts or emails you, especially if it's unsolicited.