



Jury News

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Outreach to Prevent Jury Scams

There is nothing more disturbing to jury managers than to get a telephone call from a terrified citizen who has received a threatening call from an imposter posing as a court official or law-enforcement officer demanding immediate payment of a fine for failing to appear for jury service. This jury scam has been around in one form or another for many years, but inevitably some victims still fall for this trick and are coerced into paying hundreds, even thousands, of dollars to avoid arrest. Both state and federal courts have tried to combat these scams with repeated public-education efforts in recent years. Earlier this year, the U.S. Courts issued a press release to warn the public concerning jury-service scams that had been identified by a number of U.S. District Courts.¹ Similar warnings have been issued by state and local courts.² One investigation in New Jersey eventually traced the scammers to a state prison in Georgia that had targeted victims in more than a dozen states.³

The characteristics of these juror scams are fairly consistent nationally. The fraudster calls the target and identifies himself or herself as a member of local law enforcement. The target is told that there is a pending warrant for his or her arrest for failing to appear for jury service but that a custodial arrest can be avoided by promptly paying a fine. The target is told the payment is required as soon as possible and is directed to buy a prepaid money card in a specified amount. In some cases, the fraudster will stay on the line with the target during the entirety of the criminal event. This is done presumably to ensure that the target is unable to contact friends or family who might dissuade him or her from purchasing a prepaid money card. Once the prepaid money card has been purchased, the target is told to give the fraudster the number

and codes. The fraudster then converts the codes into cash or merchandise.

Every state has criminal laws that prohibit this type of scam. However, the nature of these scams makes them difficult for law enforcement to detect in a timely manner. First, the targets are given very little time to react and alert enforcement or their local jury managers. Second, the fraudsters use prepaid cell phones to make the calls. As a result, law enforcement has almost no ability to track down perpetrators using them through an investigation of the cell-phone numbers used. Second, the fraudsters use specific prepaid money cards that they know are hard to back track. Overall, the risk of arrest is very low, making it attractive to criminals. Although it is possible there have been prosecutions of fraudsters involved in this scam, Internet searches have not revealed any, and they are certainly uncommon if any do exist.

There are certainly a wide variety of scams that target seniors or the public generally. What makes the jury-service scam particularly troublesome is not the dollar amounts that the fraudsters are able to obtain. Rather, it is the fraudulent use of the authority of the courts, which could tarnish the credibility of legitimate court orders and summonses.

Preventive measures in the form of public outreach and education are the most common responses to these types of scams, but they often are launched after the scams have hit the area and can be fairly short-lived. Instead, courts should be proactive in their efforts, using public outreach and education before the scammers arrive in the neighborhood and making an extra effort to reach vulnerable populations, especially the elderly. Here are some suggestions.

Begin Public Outreach at Home

One obvious opportunity for public education is in your own courthouse. Be sure to tell the jurors who appear for service as part of your routine orientation and display prominent notices in the jury assembly room. Jurors often speak to family, friends, and coworkers about their jury service, so this is a good way to get the word out. Be sure to post notices about local jury scams on any bulletin boards in the courthouse and at public information desks. Be sure that the court's public information officer is aware of the problem and will undertake the usual steps, such as press releases, public-service announcements on local media, op/ed articles, and even the court's social-media outlets, including Facebook pages and Twitter accounts.

It is always useful to have a plan in place to respond to jury scams before they arise. Coordinate with local law enforcement so that the court can direct victims to a specific person or division within the department that is aware of the issue and able to launch an investigation. They may also be able to help victims access victims' assistance resources to recover lost money and to help put in place protections against the possibility of future victimization, especially if the scammers have obtained sensitive information, such as bank account or Social Security numbers.

Reach out to local agencies and organizations that work with the elderly, who are often targets of these types of scams. These can include local elder-abuse agencies, senior centers, local chapters of AARP, and home-health-care providers. Courts can also seek help from the business community, including the local Chamber of Commerce, to ask that vendors that sell prepaid cash cards train their staff be on the alert for customers who may fall victim to these scams.

NCSC Jury Scam Toolkit

Working with the 26th Judicial District Court in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, the NCSC Center for Jury Studies has developed a Jury Scam Toolkit to provide courts with ideas and resources for public education and outreach efforts to combat jury scams. The toolkit includes sample press releases, editorial articles, PSAs, and other notices. It is available free at www.ncsc-jurystudies.org.

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NOTES

1. Press Release, U.S. District Courts, New Year, Old Juror Scam (Jan. 16, 2015), at <http://news.uscourts.gov/new-year-old-juror-scam>.
2. Press Release, State of Alabama Office of the Attorney General, AG Strange Warns of Jury Duty Scam (Dec. 4, 2014), online at <http://www.ago.state.al.us/News-573>; KFOR TV, Officials Warning Oklahomans of Jury Duty Scam (Oct. 22, 2014), at <http://kfor.com/2014/10/22/officials-warning-oklahomans-of-jury-duty-scam/>; WSPA TV, State Warns of New Twist in Jury Duty Scam (June 23, 2014), at <http://www.wspa.com/story/25845554/authorities-warn-of-new-twist-in-jury-duty-scam>; Press Release, Judicial Branch of Indiana, Fake Jury Duty Calls Should Be Directed to Police (Feb. 7, 2014) at http://www.in.gov/activecalendar/EventList.aspx?fromdate=1/1/2014&todate=12/31/2014&display=Year,Month&type=public&eventidn=158943&view=EventDetails&rinformation_id=195467.
3. Pew Charitable Trusts, *Fraudsters Pose as Cops, Court Officials in Jury Duty Scams*, STATELINE (Feb. 13, 2015), at <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2015/2/13/fraudsters-pose-as-cops-court-officials-in-jury-duty-scams>.