

Responding to the Growing Threat of Scammers

By Sheriff Paul H. Fitzgerald

Sheriffs today are confronting the increasing sophistication of scammers. We are not talking about chain letters or Nigerian prince emails anymore. Artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfake technology are making it easier for criminals to deceive innocent people.

A recent *Washington Post* series gives an especially heartbreaking example. An 80-year-old Maryland woman received a phone call from what appeared to be her local police department. The caller then transferred her to an “FBI agent.” The scammer used the name of a real agent, as well as several pieces of information about the victim. He persuaded her to withdraw her life savings—nearly \$600,000—from her bank account and take it to a “safe” location.

The threat of these schemes is growing rapidly. Americans lost at least \$10 billion to scammers in 2023—more than 10 times as much as in 2017—according to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). And this is just what has been reported; many victims are too embarrassed to admit they were duped.

As sheriffs, we must communicate with one another on these cases. Online fraud is almost never confined to a single county, state, or region. The vast majority of these schemes are international in nature. Your office may have critical information that may help break a case on the other side of the United States.

Congress should authorize and fund a real-time nationwide fraud claim records system that law enforcement agencies can update whenever fraud is charged, prosecuted, convicted, or even suspected. While protecting the right to due process, this system would help generate leads and help state and local agencies connect the dots between cases.

We must take time to educate ourselves and our staffs on these fraud schemes. This needs to be ongoing because the scams take many forms. In recent years, we have seen

online dating sites used for fraud schemes, and deepfake technology used for grandparent scams. And they are always changing. The most common schemes in 2017 were from fake debt collectors; today, the most common are imposter schemes and fake online shopping.

We not only enforce the law; ideally, we prevent crime. One of the best ways to do that is to educate the people we serve. While banks generally have good warning systems in place, people often do not heed these warnings as was the case with the victim in Maryland. Sometimes, people need to hear warnings from law enforcement directly.

That is why we must use our platforms to alert people about this very real threat. At a minimum, we should direct the public to online resources from the Department of Justice, FTC, and FBI. Spread the word about the FTC’s fraud hotline, 877-FTC-HELP. We should also teach people about the FTC’s basic signs of fraud.

To prevent fraud, ultimately, we will have to make it unprofitable. We can make a huge dent into the scammers’ profits if we work together. As criminal tactics constantly change, sheriffs should stay in contact and stay updated so that our communities can stay safe. ★



Story County (Iowa) Sheriff Paul H. Fitzgerald is the 2011–2012 president of the National Sheriffs' Association. He began his law enforcement career with the Waterloo (Iowa) Police Department and was elected sheriff of Story County in 1992. Sheriff Fitzgerald holds a master's degree in criminal justice from St. Ambrose University in Iowa, a bachelor's degree in law enforcement from Wartburg College in Iowa, and an associate of applied science degree in police science from

Hawkeye Institute of Technology in Iowa. He is a graduate of the Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy, 198th Session, and NSA's Institute for Leadership.

Among his many national leadership positions, Sheriff Fitzgerald represents NSA on several Department of Homeland Security councils, including the Emergency Services Sector Coordinating Council, Science & Technology Committee, First Responders Resource Group, and NG911 Coalition.

WESTERN SHERIFFS HONORED



Photo: Hood River County (Oregon) Sheriff's Office

Kane County (Utah) Sheriff Tracy Glover, left, and Hood River County (Oregon) Sheriff Matt English pause for a photo with their plaques after being named Sheriffs of the Year for 2024–2025 by the Western States Sheriffs' Association. Sheriffs English and Glover co-chair the association's government affairs and public lands committee; they were recognized for their continued work at a national level surrounding public lands and federal rulemaking that impacts communities in Western states and effects the Office of Sheriff. The Western States Sheriffs' Association represents 18 Western states and about 1,200 sheriffs. It was established in 1993 to ensure sheriffs in the West had a voice in national issues affecting communities and the Office of Sheriff.