

Elderly warned about Jamaican scam

Mary Wilkins was suspicious when she answered the telephone at her North Side home.

A man calling from Jamaica told her that because she paid her bills on time, she had won \$2 million. All she had to do, the man said, was transmit \$200 by Western Union to cover the "delivery service" for her winnings. Wilkins, 72, told the caller that no one gets rewarded for paying bills on time, and "there was no way" she would send any money. "I turned him over to my husband, who was just mad and told him he was going to turn him in." Still, Wilkins has received three more calls from Jamaica, the most recent last week. Statewide this year, Attorney General Richard Cordray's office has recorded 51 consumer complaints about telephone calls promising sweepstakes or prize winnings, including 12 involving calls from Jamaica. Wilkins was one of the callers. "We are aware of it, and we try to proactively prevent it," said spokeswoman Kimberly Kowalski. Authorities say the number of such scam calls is likely higher. "People don't come forward themselves. They're embarrassed and ashamed, and they feel afraid," said Patty Ciripompa, director of Fairfield County Adult Protective Services. Two Lancaster residents were taken by schemes in the past two years, she said. In one case, her agency was tipped off by an alert bank teller who thought it odd that a customer was withdrawing a lot of money. In the other, a Meals on Wheels volunteer overheard the victim on the phone with the scammer. Nationally, Jamaican phone scams are believed to have collected more than \$30 million last year. They are among a variety of rip-offs, instigated by phone, Internet or letter, that originate in Jamaica, Nigeria, the United Kingdom and Canada. "They seem to be the big four of the calls that we deal with regularly," said Wyatt Wilson, a Columbus police detective working in the fraud and forgery unit. The Canada grandparents scheme is another. "We got a ton of calls, reports on it within the last six months," Wilson said. A young male caller will say, for example, "Hi, Grandma," and Grandma will say "Hi, Brandon," thinking it's her grandson, the detective said. Then "Brandon" will explain that he is in Canada for a bachelor party or a fishing trip and needs money for some kind of emergency. After victims have wired money, it is too late for local police to do much about these scams "because they originate outside the United States," Wilson said. Wilkins advises people to trust their instincts. "I've never heard of anybody having to pay money to get money," she said. "Don't ever let anyone have your bank information or send anybody money. It's just not legit." dispatch.com