

Beware of scammers using lottery and prize fraud

According to OPP, many people find themselves becoming scam victims, thanks to the excitement of a surprise win or to claim prizes from fake lotteries, sweepstakes or contests.

They may receive a phone call, an e-mail, a text message, or see a pop-up screen on their computer. Sometimes, there are claims that the offer is legal or "has government approval." Often there are costs involved with claiming the prize. Instead of receiving a grand prize or fortune, one could lose every cent that they send to a scammer. Even if they do receive a prize, it may not be what was promised. And, if they have provided other personal details, their identity information could be misused for other criminal means. Prize fraud now ranks second highest in Canada in terms of the number of mass marketing fraud complaints, and fourth in terms of dollar losses reported by victims.

In 2012, the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre received 5,478 Canadian complaints of prize or lottery fraud. Of those, 833 people were victimized to the tune of more than \$5.1-million. Police believe only five per cent of victims actually report the crime.

Canadians are also dishing out these schemes abroad. Based on total number of complaints, the "prize" type of scheme is the top Canadian-based mass-marketing fraud reported by consumers in the United States.

"You cannot win money or a prize in a lottery unless you have entered it yourself, or someone else has entered it on your behalf," commented Deputy Commissioner Scott Tod of the OPP Investigations and Organized Crime Command. "You cannot be chosen as a random winner if you haven't actually entered."

"Many lottery scams try to trick you into providing your banking and personal details to claim your prize," added Detective Inspector Paul Beesley of the OPP Anti-Rackets Branch. "You should not have to pay any fee or tax to claim a legitimate prize." Members of the OPP Anti-Rackets Branch remind consumers they can protect themselves from becoming victims of the lottery or prize scam.

"Legitimate lotteries do not require people to pay a fee or tax to collect winnings.

"Never send money to anybody you don't know and trust.

"Don't provide personal banking details to anyone that you do not know and trust.

"Examine all of the terms and conditions of any offer very carefully. Claims of free or very cheap offers often have hidden costs.

Calls to premium rate phone numbers or premium text messages can be very expensive.

"Ask yourself, "Did I willingly enter this contest?"

Those who suspect they or someone they know have been approached to pay a fee to claim a lottery or other type of prize, contact the local police service or Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477 (TIPS).