

SPOTLIGHT ON SCAMS

ROMANCE SCAMS



As we socialize online, we are opening ourselves up to many great things; travel tips, fine dining reviews, fashion trends and more. Sometimes new friendships...It starts out as someone making a simple comment on social media, something complimentary or perhaps a kind remark that strikes your attention. After a short time, your new "friend" offers a photo of him or herself, and it's just as you imagined, you start to share more photos and little facts about yourself. Before you know it, you have developed a virtual relationship, you have a strong connection and are hopeful that they feel the same. It is suggested that you should plan to meet, go out on the town and have a great time getting to know each other in person, what could go wrong?

And then it happens, your new found love needs your help, "could you possibly loan me \$5,000, as I am out of the country and in need of emergency surgery", or perhaps, "I am in the midst of a huge business deal abroad and I cannot access my account from here". Whatever the reason, they are asking for *your* money. If you were to send this money, you can bet on being asked for more and more, some victims have reported losses upwards of \$49,000.00.

Criminals create false identities, steal photos from other sources and groom victims by slowly learning bits of personal information, and then build that expectation of a future together, all the while actually preparing to steal your hard earned money.

According to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3), in 2016, almost 15,000 complaints categorized as romance scams or confidence fraud were reported and the losses exceeded \$230 million. Pennsylvania ranks in the top 5 states with reported victims. The FBI reports 82% of romance scam victims are women and women over 50 are defrauded out of the most money.

While most victims fail to notify authorities due to embarrassment, we encourage you to report this criminal activity. Many of these scammers are operating outside the United States, this alone creates a greater challenge to investigate and prosecute these crimes. Keep in mind, not all of the scammers are from overseas, a recent complaint right here in Pennsylvania was allegedly perpetrated by a man living in California. Follow these tips below when anyone pushes you into a sweetheart scam scenario.

Be careful what you post, because scammers can use that information against you. If you develop a romantic relationship with someone you meet online, consider the following:

- Research the person's photo and profile using online searches to see if the material has been used elsewhere on other websites.
- Beware if the individual seems too perfect or quickly asks you to leave a dating service or Facebook to go "offline."
- Beware if the individual tells you to keep this a secret or requests inappropriate photos or financial information that could later be used to extort you.
- Beware if the individual promises to meet in person but then keeps putting it off.
- Never send money to anyone you don't know personally.

If you suspect an online relationship is a scam, stop all contact immediately. Call local police and file a complaint with the FBI at www.ic3.gov, the Pennsylvania Attorney General by email: scams@attorneygeneral.gov or online at www.attorneygeneral.gov

In cooperation with Crime Alert Berks County, this article has been written to provide basic information to warn the public about common fraud and scams by the Pennsylvania Crime Prevention Officers' Association (PCPOA) a non-profit 501c(3). For more information please visit our website at www.PaCrimePrevention.org.