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Prosecutor announces ‘EPIC’ response to would-be scammers and conmen

LIBERTY – Tis the season of the scam.

And the Clay County Prosecutor is starting an initiative to make it more difficult for scammers to escape.

Called EPIC – Elder Protection Initiative in Clay County – White’s program includes assigning an assistant prosecuting attorney to handle cons, scams and elder crimes coupled with information and awareness efforts.

“What we’re doing is making the public – particularly our more senior citizens – aware of the types of scams and con men out there, and the games they pull that put people’s finances and personal safety at risk.

Some of the scamming – particularly homeowner-targeted scams – is seasonal, said White.

“When daylight savings time starts is about the same time the homeowner scams hit,” says White. “To paraphrase Tennyson, in springtime, the scammer’s fancy lightly turns to ways of relieving you of your hard-earned money.”

White says the asphalt scam has already been spotted locally. “It’s been around for decades; it’s the old asphalt scam – the driveway paving con – where the crooks come through the neighborhood with a load of asphalt and a story: They’ve finished a driveway job a couple of blocks over and rather than take the excess back, they offer to do the driveway.

“If the homeowner says yes, they’re going to pour asphalt down and no matter what price you’ve agreed to, they’ll jack up the price and put pressure on the homeowner to make out the check. They’ve even been known to threaten to call the police if a homeowner doesn’t pay.”

Other homeowner scams are roofing, bogus home remodel/repair jobs, even termite extermination scams.

“All have this in common: There’s one price quoted and the beginning and a second, higher one at the end, and there are threats or intimidation to make the victim pay the money.”

White said that the scam artists have a knack for picking their victims. “They’re predators,” said White. “They just seem to be able to smell out the trusting.”

With EPIC, White says, his office will target and prosecute those who victimize the elderly as well as the homeowner. “I’ve assigned Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Shawn Blair to handle these cases and to work with area agencies in prosecuting these cases.”

White says there’s often a fine line that must be identified, and crossed.

“Invariably, the crooks claim this is all a misunderstanding; that there is no criminal intent. They’ll even offer to pay restitution. What we’re going to do is put these guys out of business by eliminating their potential victim pool,” said the prosecutor.

White cited a case he litigated earlier in his career in which the defendant – now serving a 60-year prison sentence – would charge his elderly victims \$1,860, no matter what the job was. He had three victims, each were victimized for \$1,860 for phony repairs, insect extermination and other scams.

“What was astonishing was this guy had over a dozen prior felony convictions. In each, he paid restitution and got probation. In Clay County, we decided enough was enough. But, even as he was being hauled off to prison, he tried to make a deal just to pay restitution and get probation. His idea of restitution, though, was ripping off more little old ladies to get money.”

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EPIC, said White, will focus on four areas; prosecution, prevention, education and awareness.

“There are some cases the successful prosecution of which gives a prosecutor a sense of satisfaction difficult to describe. Putting one of these lowlifes who rips off little old ladies or handicapped people in prison – that’s a 10 on the Dan White satisfaction scale,” said the prosecutor.

“But I’d rather prevent these cases rather than prosecute them. We’ve got a presentation we can take to any organization about EPIC, and how avoid being a victim through education,” said White

Awareness is important, said White, because it puts education into action. “I remember a young mother telling me about how her daughter came into the house eating some candy. The mom asked her where she got it and the little girl said a nice man outside had given it to her. ‘You know better than to take candy from a stranger,’ said the mom, horrified. And the child innocently said: ‘That was a stranger?’

“Being educated – knowing there are scams – is fine. But putting that education to work – knowing that there is someone trying to scam you and knowing what to do and who to call – that’s the key element to the success of EPIC,” says White.

White said a telephone number has been set up to handle calls on elder victimization and scams. That number is (816) 792-7666.

“The EPIC scam line is for information purposes and does not negate the requirement that illegal activity be investigated by law enforcement before charges can be filed,” said White. “Our office will provide guidance and help in these matters to our senior citizens. Additionally, attempted scams or shady individuals will be reported to the area police departments.”

Those interested in learning more or getting an EPIC brochure should contact the prosecutor’s office at (816) 792-7657.

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More information, contact Dan White or Jim Roberts at (816) 792-7657.