

Senior citizen Issues

Growing scam targeting seniors

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DRACUT —Over a year ago, Bethany Loveless' concern grew over a scam involving the new Medicare cards that were expected to roll out during the month of April. Scammers, in calls to unsuspecting seniors, would pose as Medicare staff ask to verify personal information.

Now Loveless, executive director of the Dracut Council on Aging, has another scam to worry about.

"A senior might get a cold call from somebody saying that 'You've been authorized to receive this brace from your doctor.' Knee brace, wrist brace, ankle brace, you name it," Loveless said. "'You've been authorized to receive this, it's free'... and what they're trying to do is just receive your Medicare information."

The Massachusetts Senior Medicare Patrol (SMP) Program, a statewide partnership between community-based organizations and mainstream agencies, has the following warning in an awareness campaign: "BRACE YOURSELF."

The flier shows photos of three individuals with different braces: a man in an arm sling, a woman in a knee brace and a man in a neck brace. It urges seniors to protect themselves against deceptive marketing. Below is a snippet:

- Do not provide your Medicare Unique ID or Social Security number to anyone, except your trusted medical providers.
- Medicare and Social Security will NOT call you and ask for personal information.

Lucilia Prates-Ramos, statewide director of the Massachusetts Senior Medicare Patrol Program, said this is an ongoing scam, but her office saw an uptick earlier this year. As of Thursday, she said her staff has received calls from more than 50 people about it.

The scam can play out in different ways, according to Prates-Ramos. Scammers call and engage an individual in conversation and are sometimes able to obtain his or her Medicare number. They will then ship some equipment to the victim's home and Medicare gets billed.

"Each of these bills that we've seen is at least \$1,000 for the brace, and these braces could be bought at Walmart or Walgreens or CVS," she said.

Prates-Ramos said there was a recent case involving a Dracut woman who is currently in an assisted living facility. Medical equipment from a company in Florida was sent to the woman's former address, now occupied by her daughter and son-in-law.

"Allegedly the company spoke with her on the phone, but her telephone has not been in order for two years," Prates-Ramos said of the victim.

In this case, Prates-Ramos said, the son-in-law acted quickly to resolve the issue but the family ended up receiving another package in the mail with even more braces approved by and billed to Medicare, this time from a company in California.

"My takeaway is people need to hang up. When somebody calls them offering free products, or ask them some questions that regards their personal information, just hang up," Prates-Ramos said. "Do not give people any personal information... you need to be very careful."

Loveless said that, as of Wednesday, the senior center had not come across any Dracut seniors who have fallen victim to the scam. None that have been willing to admit it, she noted.

"Scammers are so crafty. That's what's concerning, is that there is always something new that they're coming out with to stay ahead of the education that we're providing the seniors," Loveless said. "They're always one step ahead, it seems, and they can be so convincing. So, so convincing. It's easy to fall for what they say."

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