

Elderly are a Favorite Target for Traveling Con Artists

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“Scammers hit elderly women for thousands” was one of the first headlines I noticed when I opened up my *Houston Chronicle* one Wednesday last month. Thinking for sure the article would be about another lottery scam, I was not too surprised to read it was about older adults being targeted by traveling con artists. We hear about them quite frequently, but they come through in groups, commit their evil deeds and then are quickly off to another city or town.

The stories all have a similar ring; an individual is approached by a stranger who tells they want to help them by doing something like repair their car, repair their roof or repair something else on their home. The seniors are convinced by the fast talking, nice people only to be pressured to give them thousands of dollars for nothing. Most likely, the senior is frightened into giving them the money and are often too scared to report this crime.

Besides the offer to repair an item or a house, these same thieves have other schemes to steal money and personal items. Here are some of their tactics, and remember, they often use children as a decoy.

- Someone approaches you in the yard and says they are with the city or local utility and need to check on something in your backyard and ask you to go with them. While you are in the back, another person enters the front of your house and steals items. NEVER walk someone around to the back of your house. Tell them you will meet them by the side gate, go back inside and lock the door and call the police.
- You answer a knock at the door by an individual who for some reason or other needs to come into your house. They may say they are with the city or they may have a child with them and say they need help. If you let them in, they will get you distracted so they can steal items. And you need to know that the children are an important part of the scheme and are working with the adult. DO NOT let strangers in your home. If they are in distress, offer to make a phone call for them or hand them your phone, but keep a locked screen or door between you and them.
- Someone walks up to you in a parking lot, oftentimes a woman with children, asking for a small amount of money. They usually just need \$5 or \$10 or \$20 to get gas, a bus ticket, a tire repaired – you name it – they just need a little money. You need to tell them NO and get away from them quickly. Head back to the store and look for a security guard and report them. DO NOT try to get in your car, especially if you have packages. It is difficult to juggle bags and keys when people are pressuring you.
- Someone stops you in the parking lot and tells you that you hit their car. They immediately want money from you for repairs or they are willing to follow you home or to the bank to get money. Roll up your windows and lock your doors and call the police on your cell phone or drive toward the parking lot security and report the behavior.

Never accept offers of help from a stranger. If you need a car repair or home repair, you should be doing business with a legitimate company and you should first check them out by calling the Better Business Bureau at 713-868-9500. When you hear the voice option, if you say “representative,” you will be connected to a real person!

Editor's Note: This is a reprint of an article for the *Houston Chronicle Senior Living* section.