

Congressional Hearing

02/04/2021

Good afternoon esteemed members of Congress, thank you for inviting me here today to talk to you about our organization and what is happening in the world of scams and frauds over this past 2020 season.

First let me introduce myself. My name is Traci Ponto and I am a retired Spokane Police officer after serving for 25 years. I now work full time as a Crime Victim Advocate for Spokane Community Oriented Policing Services. Spokane C.O.P.S. is the non profit organization for the Spokane Police department.

We have 5 staff members, 400 volunteers and 9 COP Shops throughout our city. Our COP shops serve as a liaison between the police department and our communities and provide a location for neighbors to come in and seek assistance with their concerns. Our COP Shops provide programs such as Blockwatch, Identity Theft and Fraud victim callbacks, Neighborhood Observation Patrols, and other programs that work on getting neighbors engaged in their community, working alongside Law Enforcement and taking ownership in keeping their communities safe.

Our organization focuses on crime prevention and working with neighbors to help resolve quality of life issues.

In a time where our nation is asking questions on how to get our law enforcement and community working together our focus is to help educate the community and provide crime prevention tips to help solve many of their concerns.

My current position as a Crime Victim Advocate is to help any and all victims of crime. Law Enforcement is able to go after the criminals, but who takes care of those that are victimized? Many people feel unsafe after being victimized and as an advocate we are able to help restore some of that sense of safety by providing a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design survey, among other services.

When you are a victim of Identity Theft and Fraud you are incredibly vulnerable to losing your money which is what supports your daily life. Our advocates primary goals are to respond to the emotional, psychological, and physical needs of crime victims. We assist victims in stabilizing their lives after victimization and help them understand and participate in the criminal justice system. Our goal is to restore a measure of security and safety for them.

In 2020 many victims found themselves losing their employment or working from home. With quarantine and social distancing, victims found themselves doing more of their shopping online. Victim Advocates saw an increase in Identity Theft, Fraud and Scams with this vulnerable population.

Phishing scams targeted victims by claiming they were trying to process Amazon returns and needed more personal information. Microsoft scams targeted victims using threats of their subscriptions expiring which would disrupt people trying to work online from home.

Unemployment fraud where databases were hacked, personal information stolen and fraudulent unemployment claims surfaced. This alone affected thousands of people dependent on supplementing their lost wages. This also created concern from victims that were still employed yet had claims opened

under their names. Now as we prepare for tax season we have seen an increase from victims who are receiving paperwork showing unemployment income they were not aware of.

With the pandemic, victims that are already feeling isolated and lonely are more vulnerable to phone calls and social media messages that lead to scams.

Victims that have been targeted by scammers and have lost money, are often too ashamed to tell family members and have increased anxiety and fall into despair. Victims do not know where to turn and the magnitude of the crime is overwhelming creating mental health related issues.

COVID set a perfect storm by creating isolation and depression that put people at a higher risk for scams and allowed scammers many different opportunities to prey on this vulnerable audience.

As a Crime Victim Advocate our goal is to provide assistance to our clients and walk them through a step by step process of reporting the fraud, gathering evidence to provide their financial institution, and protect them from further identity theft and fraud type crimes.

Thank you for your time today

Traci Ponto

Spokane COPS Crime Victim Advocate