

District Attorney and Sheriff Warn Against Scam IRS Calls

Putnam County District Attorney Robert Tendy and Putnam County Sheriff Donald B. Smith are warning area residents to be on guard against an IRS tax collection scam that has bilked victims throughout the nation. In recent days, several Putnam County residents have reported that they have received bogus calls from con artists identifying themselves as IRS officials and demanding payments of money for taxes. Many of those targeted by the thieves are senior citizens.

In the scam, imposters pretending to be from the IRS or another agency telephone people and claim they owe taxes. The callers typically say that the persons must pay immediately or else face the loss of their driver's license or business license, face deportation or go to jail.

The callers may alter, or "spoof," caller

ID services to make it look like they are calling from the actual agency. Scammers often research their targets online to pick up some personal details about them, such as their age and the names of other family members, to make the intended victim believe they have official access to their tax records. Callers may use official IRS titles and give out a badge number to identify themselves.

Scammers usually demand that the targeted person pay through an online service or by using an untraceable cash or debit card, often directing victims to a bank or convenience store to make the payment through a wire service such as Western Union.

More recently, tax scammers have gone beyond using the phone. Late last summer, the IRS warned that the con artists are

copying official IRS letterhead to contact victims through email or regular mail. In another twist, the thieves provide a real IRS address and tell the victim to mail the receipt for the payment to the agency.

The scam has been occurring across the nation for about two years. According to published reports, hundreds of thousands of scam contacts have occurred nationwide and thousands of victims have been collectively scammed out of millions of Dollars.

The IRS recommends that the best way of dealing with the thieves is to just hang up the phone. According to the IRS, real agents will not contact taxpayers by phone without first sending a written tax bill in the mail. Furthermore, the IRS does not demand immediate payment of owed taxes. The IRS also will not demand just

one kind of specific payment and does not threaten to call in the local police for nonpayment of taxes.

The IRS advises taxpayers that the best defense against IRS scammers is to know your own tax situation. If a taxpayer filed a tax return that was accepted by the IRS, and even received a refund, any tax dispute would be about specific income items or deductions, and the IRS would contact the taxpayer by mail. If that has not happened, a taxpayer's tax status is not an issue.

In addition to the IRS guidance, Sheriff Smith offered a general reminder to residents that they should never give out personal financial information to callers over the phone or send money to strangers. District Attorney Tendy said that any perpetrators of the scams would be prosecuted vigorously.

Putnam's Mental Health Month Shows Problems Common But Treatable

Mental health problems are terribly common: one in five Americans experiences mental illness in a given year. In Putnam County the numbers are similar, and may be rising. In a recent national survey, Putnam residents estimated more poor mental health days per month than they had reported in previous years. This May, Mental Health Month, Putnam's community organizations and the county's Department of Health are joining to bring awareness, sensitivity and action to this problem.

"The high numbers of mental health problems means that virtually everyone has a family member or close personal friend who lives with a mental health issue, or they are living with one themselves," said County Executive MaryEllen Odell. "The ultimate role of government is to protect its citizenry—that's why our health department and our department of social services and mental health, along with many community partners, have selected mental health as a priority for our community health improvement plan. It's also why the Suicide Prevention Task Force was

established in the County."

Interim Health Commissioner Michael J. Nesheiwat, MD, explained, "These rising numbers of reported poor mental health days are something we must take seriously." The data comes from the national premier telephone survey, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), and Putnam residents have reported 3.1 poor mental health days in the previous month—up from 2.2 days in previous surveys.

"While mental illnesses are extremely common, they unfortunately are not talked about often," said Megan Castellano, executive director of the Mental Health Association in Putnam County, Inc. "This is problematic because they are also very treatable, and help is available here in Putnam County. We need to speak up and encourage sharing. This is key to breaking down stigma—to show that if you live with a mental illness, you are not alone with your feelings and your symptoms."

To highlight how widespread mental health challenges are and to bring awareness to how these conditions can be diagnosed and successfully treated, the

Putnam County chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is sponsoring its Third Annual Mental Health Awareness Walk on Saturday, May 14, from 9 a.m. to noon. Registration begins at 8 a.m. and forms must be turned in by 8:50 a.m. at the Carmel Fire House. For more information, including a registration form, visit NAMI Putnam on the web at www.namiputnam.org.

Putnam residents can also join mental health providers and other community organizations for the Mental Health Recovery Conference, entitled "Redefining Mental Health: Perspectives on Wellness and Recovery," on May 12 from 9:30 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. at the Putnam County Golf Course.

"This inspiring event will feature consumers, family members, and acclaimed national and state leaders who will speak about wellness and initiate change in our way of thinking about mental health recovery," says Diane Russo, chief executive officer of Putnam Family & Community Services, one of the organizations hosting the event. For further information, visit the Putnam

Family & Community Services website at www.pfcsinc.org.

The national theme of this year's Mental Health Month is "Life with a Mental Illness," a call to action by Mental Health America, Castellano's national organization, to share what life with a mental illness feels like to someone going through it. One way is by tagging social media posts with #mentalillnessfeelslike. Posting with the hash tag helps fight the stigma and shame that accompany mental illness—and that can prevent individuals from seeking help early on. The Putnam County Department of Health will be sharing national and local stories on their Facebook page during May.

Castellano, together with Marla Behler, program coordinator for the Child Advocacy Center of Putnam County, co-chair the Suicide Prevention Task Force that started in 2013. Preventing suicide along with improving mental health were two priorities identified during the development of the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). Task force members and CHIP partners include the Mental Health Providers Group and numerous other local organizations.

Mental Health Month, commemorated each May, was started 67 years ago by Mental Health America. Its overarching purpose is to raise awareness about mental health conditions and the importance of good mental health for everyone. Online youth and adult screening tools are available at its website, under "Finding Help." Fact sheets on depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder are listed under "Mental Health Info." The web address is: www.mentalhealthamerica.net.

For a list of mental health resources in Putnam County, visit the Putnam County Cares app www.putnamcountycares.com/ speak and in the menu on the right, click on "Resource List."

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