

Texas Lottery Commission Press Release - March 18, 2002

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Texas Lottery Commission Unveils Campaign To Stop Lottery Scam Targeting Elderly Hispanics

(Houston, March 18) - - Texas Lottery Commission Executive Director Linda Cloud today kicked off a statewide public awareness campaign to warn elderly Hispanics about a scam that uses promises of a winning lottery ticket to steal their money.

"If you are approached by someone who promises you a part of a big lottery prize in exchange for money, please get away from them and call the police immediately," said Cloud. "This is the same scam we've seen for the last three years throughout the state, and now the con artists are back in Texas working this dirty game, preying upon our senior citizens."

Houston Police Department Major Offenders Division Captain S. A. Smith joined Cloud at Ripley House, one of the largest community service centers in East Houston.

"We're always grateful to law enforcement officials for the work they do to capture these unscrupulous characters and to get the word out in the Hispanic community and to all of our players not to fall for these scams," Cloud said. "We need to show these con artists that Texas is no longer a place where they can run this scam. When we catch you, your bogus ticket will win you a trip to jail."

Also present were Ann Hilbig of Neighborhood Centers Inc, which runs 50 community service centers throughout the City, and representatives of the Houston chapter of AARP and the National Hispanic Council on Aging.

Cloud said the campaign's biggest weapon in the fight against the con artists is information, and the Lottery Commission is making several items available that can be used over time to keep the public informed.

"We've produced the "Lottery Scam Truth Report," a flyer in English and Spanish that details how the scam works, public service announcements or PSAs in English and Spanish, video news releases, print releases and a web page dedicated to updating the Latin Lotto scam," she said. "The flyer will be displayed at all of our 16,700 Lottery retail outlets, and will also be distributed through community groups and law enforcement agencies around the state. The state's television stations already have the PSA, and we are very appreciative of their willingness to help get the word out to prevent more victims of this scam."

Cloud emphasized that the procedure for claiming a winning ticket is simple, without the "requirements" alleged by the thieves.

"The Texas Lottery never requires any money in order to have a ticket claimed," she said. "And a claim is not denied because a claimant is from another country and may be in the U. S. without proper documentation. We're here to warn our senior citizens to be wary of anyone asking for money in exchange for what appears to be a winning Lottery ticket."

The con artists lure their victims by offering them what appears to be a winning Cash 5 ticket or Lotto Texas ticket.

The perpetrators often ask for money from victims to defray non-existent Lottery taxes and claim they have insufficient identification to claim the prize.

Once they've ensnared a victim, the thieves sometimes call someone who claims to be an employee of the Texas Lottery who confirms that the ticket is a winner. The person on the phone is part of the scam.

In other cases, the thieves stop at a Lottery retail outlet to obtain winning ticket results, which seem to validate their fraudulent claim. Victims fail to notice that the printout they're being shown is not really a ticket, or that the winning number combinations were for a drawing held on a different date.

Cloud noted that it's been tough to catch the con artists "in the act."

"The con artists never let their victims out of their sight while the scam is happening, and by the time these poor people figure out what has happened, it's too late," Cloud said.

Once the money is exchanged, the perpetrators make up some excuse to get away from the victim. Sometimes, they've pretended to be sick, and ask the victim to go into a pharmacy or store to buy them medicine, and then they disappear with the victim's money.

During the last three years, Lottery officials have heard about cases reported to law enforcement in Dallas, Hempstead, Navasota, San Antonio, Corpus Christi, El Paso, Laredo, San Marcos, New Braunfels and Austin.

In 1999, thieves ran a similar scam in the Houston area, preying upon elderly Hispanic women. Houston law enforcement officials apprehended several suspects from Central and South America who were involved in at least 20 cases of robbery.

Cloud said Lottery security personnel have assisted law enforcement agencies around the state in the past to capture criminals running this same kind of scam.

On April 30, law enforcement representatives from a seven-county area surrounding Houston will attend the first regional training seminar offered as part of the public awareness campaign. Law enforcement officers will share information that will help them better track reports of this crime, conduct investigations and make arrests.