



# PROTECTING SENIOR TEXANS FROM ADVANCE FEE FRAUD

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

FOR THE 90-YEAR-OLD BANK CUSTOMER, there were no Presidents' Day weekend plans in sight. There was only the stark reality of his wife's long suffering mind and his long suffering heart. Although he was all too aware that both he and his wife suffered from Alzheimer's disease, he had no idea that they were also victims of a scam to defraud aging and unwell victims. It all started back when "good friends" called again to convince him that if he sent them another \$15,000, he would finally receive the \$2 million prize.

Fortunately, a vigilant employee at the local bank grew concerned about her elderly customer's frequent visits to the bank and decided to contact the Texas Attorney General's Office. By that time, she explained, the customer had already wired his "good friends" \$75,000 via Western Union so that he would be eligible to claim his \$2 million prize. The bank employee pleaded with the customer – and at one point, it appeared she had convinced him to stop sending money to the scam artists. But his "good friends" kept calling, so the elderly man returned to the bank to liquidate his CDs because he had already drained his checking and savings accounts.

The bank employee explained the scheme in detail to the Attorney General's Office. Apparently operating under his "good friends" instructions,

the elderly man would withdraw cash in \$15,000 increments. Then, he would take the money to a nearby Western Union outlet, which would take possession of the cash and wire the money per the elderly man's instructions. Although the concerned bank employee showed the customer documents from the Office of the Attorney General's website, warning about advance fee scams, he was undeterred. So when she contacted the Attorney General's Office, she wanted to know what else she could do to make him stop without violating bank regulations or other laws.

The public information specialist who fielded the call at the Attorney General's Office agreed to help and immediately contacted a colleague – Outreach coordinator John Elizarde, who also has a background in law enforcement. Before he was appointed Outreach coordinator, Elizarde was assigned to the attorney general's law enforcement division, where he worked regularly with the Southwest Border Anti-Money Laundering Alliance. The Alliance was launched in 2010 to help Texas and other border states coordinate money laundering prevention, investigations and prosecutions. Under an agreement between all four border states and Western Union, the Alliance also established new protocols for sharing Western Union's extensive

information about wire transfers that originate in border states. Relying upon his extensive knowledge of the money services business and his contacts at Western Union, Elizarde sought to uncover the real identity of the elderly man's "good friends."

After speaking with the concerned bank teller, Elizarde sent an email inquiry to his contact at Western Union's Consumer Protection Ethics and Compliance Division. When Elizarde's phone rang thirty minutes later, his Western Union contact was on the line. The news was predictable – and not good. Western Union had quickly reviewed the wire transfers and confirmed that the 90-year-old man's money had been sent to the Philippines and Nigeria.

Worse, because wire transfers are converted to cash or cashier's checks when they arrive, there is simply no way to identify the perpetrators or recoup the money from foreign countries that are thousands of miles away. But, because of a vigilant bank teller's call to the Attorney General's Office, she was able to prevent her elderly customer from being defrauded again.

After it was contacted by the Attorney General's Outreach coordinator, Western Union immediately put a nationwide flag on all transactions by the local bank's elderly customer. A systemwide alert instructed all Western Union outlets to

contact the company's corporate office before processing the bank customer's future wire transfer requests.

As a law enforcement veteran who had studied advance payment scams, Elizarde recognized that the unscrupulous offshore criminals who posed as the elderly victim's "good friends" would not simply stop calling. So Elizarde also contacted MoneyGram, another large money services firm with outlets across Texas, and arranged for that firm to implement similar security measures that would protect the elderly bank customer.

Although it is virtually impossible to recover the elderly couple's money from the foreign criminals who defrauded them, this case shows how a vigilant bank teller, quick-thinking state authorities and a responsive Western Union orchestrated a coordinated effort to prevent a 90-year-old victim from losing his life's savings to an advance fee scam. These scams – which can range from fraudulent foreign lottery winnings to a non-existent sweepstakes prize or even a made-up inheritance from a purported long-lost relative abroad – frequently target our senior citizens. Concerned family members, friends, bank officials and long-term care personnel are seniors' first line of defense.

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