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Listening, acting and advocating for victims - especially our seniors | Hicks

Christopher J. Hicks Special to the RGJ

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April 19–25, 2026, marks National Crime Victims’ Rights Week, an annual observance dedicated to raising awareness about victimization and the profound impact crime has on individuals, families and communities. Since its inception in 1981, this week has served as a national call to eliminate barriers to justice and to honor the resilience of victims, principles that guide the work of the Washoe County District Attorney’s Office every day.

This year’s theme - Listen, Act, Advocate. Protect victims, serve communities.- is particularly timely as we confront one of the fastest-growing and most devastating forms of crime: Elder exploitation.

Washoe County, like much of the nation, is on the front edge of what experts call the “silver wave,” a rapidly growing population of older adults who deserve to enjoy their later years with dignity, independence and security. Unfortunately, this demographic shift has also made seniors an increasingly attractive target for sophisticated criminals, many of whom operate as part of organized fraud networks.

Today’s scams are not the obvious schemes of the past. They are calculated, technologically advanced and psychologically manipulative. We are seeing a sharp rise in text and phone-based scams, including so-called “pig butchering” schemes, which are long-term fraud operations in which perpetrators build trust with victims over time before ultimately convincing them to invest large sums of money into fake opportunities. Other common scams involve impersonations of government agents or companies, like Amazon, designed to create fear and urgency. These crimes often

result in life-altering financial losses and emotional trauma, stripping victims not only of their savings but of their sense of security.

A recent case prosecuted by my office underscores both the seriousness of this threat and our commitment to holding offenders accountable. A jury convicted Amit Bhanwala-Singh of Exploitation of an Elderly Person and Attempt to Obtain Money Under False Pretense. This case, investigated in partnership with the Reno Police Department, the Truckee Police Department and the United States Secret Service, involved a coordinated fraud scheme targeting an elderly woman.

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The victim received a fraudulent Amazon text message, which led her into contact with individuals posing as federal agents. Through manipulation and intimidation, she was convinced she was under investigation for money laundering and needed to “safeguard” her assets. Over time, she was coerced into making multiple deliveries of cash and gold across California, ultimately losing approximately \$500,000.

Thanks to the victim’s courage in coming forward and the coordinated efforts of multiple law enforcement agencies, a joint sting operation led to arrests and ultimately a conviction at jury trial. The defendant now faces up to 30 years in prison.

This case also highlights an important truth: effectively combating elder exploitation requires a multidisciplinary approach. Law enforcement, prosecutors, financial institutions, social services and community organizations must work together to identify, investigate and support victims. Expanding and strengthening these collaborative efforts is a priority for my office in the coming year.

But government alone cannot solve this problem. As a community, we all have a role to play. We must **listen** to the concerns of our seniors, to the warning signs of exploitation, and to the evolving tactics used by scammers. We must **act** by reporting suspicious activity, checking in on vulnerable neighbors and family members and ensuring victims are connected to resources and support. And we must **advocate** for

stronger protections, tougher penalties and continued education to prevent these crimes before they happen.

Education is one of the most powerful tools. When I speak to senior groups throughout Washoe County, I often share a few simple reminders:

If it sounds too good to be true, it is. No one is giving away money, prizes or miracle cures.

Pause before you act. Scammers rely on urgency - slow down and verify. Let unknown calls go to voicemail. If it's legitimate, they will likely leave a message.

Be cautious of emails or texts with links or attachments - especially from unknown senders or those claiming to be from your bank, Amazon or other trusted businesses; instead of clicking, go directly to the company's official website or contact them through a verified phone number.

Never share personal information. Social Security numbers, Medicare details and bank information should never be given out over the phone or by text.

These simple steps can make a critical difference.

During National Crime Victims' Rights Week, we honor the strength and resilience of victims. But our responsibility does not end there. We must remain vigilant, proactive and united in our efforts to protect those most at risk. Because in Washoe County, standing up for victims is not just a theme for one week, it is our mission every day.

Chris Hicks is the Washoe County District Attorney. He was first elected in 2014 and reelected in 2018 and 2022.

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