

DR MARISA PATERSON MLA SPEECH

May 2021

Scamming the elderly

I wish to bring to the attention of the Assembly a concern I have about the number of elderly people in our community who are being impacted by scammers.

This year alone, 17,836 scams have been reported, targeting Australians over 55.

In January to March this year, older Australians have lost over 17 million dollars combined. That's a staggering amount.

This is particularly devastating when you consider that these abuses take place at a point where people often look to retire and enjoy the superannuation they've worked hard for.

The most prevalent scams are related to technology, investment and dating.

Dating and romance scammers take advantage of the elderly when they are emotionally vulnerable – often after they have lost their life partners. Scammers leverage the socially isolated and prey on the lonely, leaving a devastating financial and emotional impact – for the individual, and for their family members.

Investment scammers, including fake or fraudulent financial advisors, have the capacity to erode the financial security of the elderly due to their direct access to the person's superannuation and bank accounts.

Another big one is internet and technology-based scams, whereby the elderly are taken advantage of due to their lack of formal education and familiarity with digital technology.

The use of crypto currencies like Bitcoin, gift cards and international fund transfers are some of the common methods used by scammers to escape responsibility and circumvent attempts at recovery.

Older Australians are also the prime target of door-to-door and maintenance scams, which allows the fraudster to charm or frighten the victim into their scheme. Phone scams are the most common.

I have some personal examples of each of these scenarios in my own suburb. A regular door-knocker is well known in the Weston Creek area, targeting households to request money for health and support. Often, it is older people who more likely fall victim to his scam, as they are vulnerable, intimidated and frightened.

I also know of another older couple who agreed for what they believed was a physio assessor to visit their home and provide advice. Instead, it was a mattress salesperson.

We all need to be aware this is happening in our community, in front of our eyes, in plain daylight. I'm sure each one of us knows someone elderly – maybe someone close to us or maybe through a story from someone else – who has been scammed. It may be a small amount, or it might be large figures.

We need to place an emphasis on prevention. We need to look out for our elderly family, friends and neighbours. We need to help them recognise when they're being scammed. We need to help them know where to turn for advice.

Educational programs such as those run by the Council of the Ageing here in the ACT, as well as the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's scam watch program, seek to level the playing field and provide resources for our elderly population.

Volunteers from COTA ACT are hosting a drop-in session at the Queanbeyan Seniors Centre to assist elderly people in our community with digital support this Thursday 13 May. Details are available on COTAs Facebook page and website.

I call on everyone to check in on older family, friends and neighbours. Make them aware of the extent of scamming that's happening. Help them recognise what to look out for, and encourage them to speak out if unsure, and to connect with organizations like COTA for information.

Thank you.