How to Avoid, Protect Yourself From Scams

By Carlos Villatoro
Public Affairs and Media Officer

Like most households, Netflix has become a nightly ritual that offers hours of entertainment for my entire family.

So, when I received an email recently purportedly from Netflix informing me that my subscription would be canceled unless I press the ‘update information’ link at the bottom of the email and re-enter my billing information, I was understandably alarmed. I’ve never had this issue before, and I can’t go without my “Love is Blind,” but what do they even mean by “unable to validate your billing information?”

It was at that point that my inner reporter senses went off and I decided to check the actual email address that sent me the note.
As I sit to write this column, I am mere hours away from Thanksgiving, my favorite holiday. It’s worth noting that high on my list of things to be thankful for, is the opportunity to work for and lead this office. This group of almost 80 public servants is extravagant in their generosity, inspiring in their compassion and brilliant in their approach.

Over the past year, we faced some significant staff shortages in each of our five departments. This isn’t unique to our office but that’s of little solace when caseloads increase, work piles up and the stress of an already demanding job rattles on at a fever pitch.

Rather than facing these challenges with complaints, our staff rallied around each other, offered to handle duties outside of normal assignments, met new demands with a can-do spirit and ultimately built trust with the public and with each other. They continued the mission of this office without missing a step and I am thankful to have borne witness to their passion for the work and their kindness to this community.

We have already hired and are soon to onboard several new colleagues. This is a much-needed reprieve for the staff who have endured these months and reinvigorates the office as we look forward to a new 2024. I am intensely hopeful that with this new infusion, we can continue to expand our efforts to educate the public about what we do, open new opportunities for you to be a part of our mission whether at the Monarch Justice Center or through our volunteer program and maybe even host our office’s first Elder Abuse Summit in June of 2024.

My warmest wishes for a safe and lovely holiday season.
Spotlight on Mental Health: Monarch Justice Center to Provide Trauma Recovery Services

By Carlos Villatoro
Public Affairs & Media Officer

Victims of domestic violence, elder abuse, human trafficking and sexual assault in Napa County have a new source of mental health services designed to help them overcome the trauma often associated with crimes.

The grand opening of the Trauma Recover Center (TRC) at the Monarch Justice Center held in early November served as the official launch of trauma-informed therapy and case management services for victims of crime in Napa County.

Since its grand opening the TRC has assisted 11 women referred for mental health services from the Monarch Justice Center and NEWS explains Kari Cordero, the psychiatric nurse practitioner and sexual assault nurse examiner whose team operates the TRC.

Cordero, who is also the Executive Director of Napa Solano SANE-SART – the group that obtained the grant from the California Victims Compensation Board to launch TRCs in Napa and Sonoma counties, said the TRC hopes to bridge the gap in the limited number of mental health providers and costs associated with seeking mental health therapy for victims of crime.

"There’s a lot of barriers to obtaining services," Cordero said. "One of the nice things about the TRC is that it’s free."

Modeled after a TRC that Cordero and her team have operated in Solano County for the past six years, Napa’s TRC is made possible through a $2.5 million California Victims Compensation Board grant that seeks to provide mental health treatment and case management services to underserved victims of crime who may not be eligible for victims’ compensation or who may be fearful of reporting a crime to law enforcement.

“When somebody has been victimized, it’s definitely a life-altering event for a lot of people,” Cordero said. “It becomes a problem when processing what has happened with a professional doesn’t happen. So being able to get somebody therapy within 1-3 weeks is so important. Finding somebody who deals specifically in trauma and specifically in victimization is really important because it helps them to get better, sooner.”

The TRC provides 16 weeks of mental health services to its clients Cordero said. The 16 weeks can be extended on a case-by-case basis. Aside its partnership with the Monarch Justice Center, Napa SANE-SART also partnered with Aldea Children and Family Services to provide the TRC services.
Sure enough, the sender’s email address was linked to an iCloud account, not from Netflix, and this told me everything that I needed to know. It was a scam that triggered more questions than answers.

How was this person so expertly able to re-create the official look and feel of a Netflix communication? How did they obtain my email address? Was it really a person spending time to write directly to me, or was it sent through some labor farm located in some remote part of the world?

With the rise of technology and especially AI (artificial intelligence), scam artists are now better equipped than they have ever been in the history of the world to take your money.

It’s a crime that we often see at the Napa County District Attorney’s Office and can be challenging to prosecute. Most of the people perpetuating these scams are not located in the United States, and many of them use unknowing intermediates, such as Uber drivers, to pull off the grifts.

Luckily, there are some things you can do to protect your wallets from these modern-day thieves – the following is some advice that the Napa County District Attorney’s Office Consumer Protection Unit typically shares during its outreach workshops on scam prevention.

**Fraud Prevention**

Always protect yourself, your personal information and assets:

- Be cautious of individuals offering goods/services that are too good to be true

Specific Tips to Protect Yourself from Scams

- Screen your phone calls
- Be very wary of emails or text messages that contain links
- Check emails and texts closely for spelling and grammatical errors
- Never make payments with pre-paid debit or gift cards
- Government agencies will never demand payment over the phone

**More Tips to Protect Yourself from Scams**

- If the caller identifies themselves as a friend or relative in need of money, get off the phone and call that friend or relative at their contact number to ask if they need assistance
- If the caller identifies themselves as being from a business, get their contact information, look up the number for the business and call the business directly
- If an email asks you to login via a link, don’t do it

**What Do if You are Victimized?**

- Seek help from someone you trust, law enforcement, or other credible agency
- Dealing with ID Theft, Fraud and Scams is difficult for anyone at any age
- Turn to a professional to help assist you with the necessary steps:
  - Report the Crime
  - Address damages
  - Restore your good name and safety
- If left unreported the situation will only get worse

**Reporting Identity Theft**

- File a police report

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DA Staff Updates

Lauren Noga, Deputy District Attorney I

Lauren Noga joins the Napa County District Attorney’s Office as a Deputy District Attorney after recently completing a 10-week, post-bar law clerk stint at the Napa County District Attorney’s Office.

Lauren is a graduate of UCLA, where she double majored in History and French. She attained her law degree from UC Law SF. Prior to her arrival in Napa, Lauren worked in the US Attorney’s Office in San Francisco and at the Securities and Exchange Commission. She also worked for the Alameda County District Attorney’s Office while studying at UC SF Law.

Max Warren, Deputy District Attorney I

Max Warren joins the Napa County District Attorney’s Office as a Deputy District Attorney, shortly after completing a 10-week, post-bar law clerk program in Napa.

Max attained his undergraduate degree from Kenyon College, where he played baseball, and his law degree from UC Law SF. When he is not arguing in a Napa court or writing motions for the DA’s Office, you can find him fishing in Alaska or riding his Peloton bike.

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• Change your passwords
• Call the fraud departments of the companies where you know ID theft has occurred and ask to freeze your accounts
• Contact one of the credit reporting agencies and have them place a fraud alert on your credit report or request a credit freeze
• Review your credit report for accounts you did not open or new inquiries
• If you gave your social security number go to identitytheft.gov and follow the process to help recover ID

Resources for Victims:

• Financial Crimes Enforcement Center Internet Crime Complaint Center
• FBI Local Field Office
• Federal Trade Commission or by phone: 1-877-382-4357
• California Attorney General’s Office or by phone: 1-800-952-5225
• DA’s Consumer Protection Unit or contact our Consumer Fraud Line at (707) 253-4059

Bogus, scam email sent to the author.
IN THE COMMUNITY

Out & About

SURVIVORS’ BREAKFAST
10/26/2023

SWEARING IN CEREMONY
11/15/2023

CONSUMER FRAUD AND SCAMS
PRESENTATION 10/24/2023

CALISTOGA TRUNK OR TREAT
10/29/2023

Photos: Lauren Weitz, Carlos Villatoro, and Alejandra Mendieta-Bedolla
People v. Michael Scott Posey

A petition to re-sentence convicted murderer Michael Scott Posey, age 71, to a lower sentence was denied by Napa County Superior Court Judge Monique Langhorne. On October 26, 2006, following a six-week jury trial, Mr. Posey was convicted of the murder of his wife Elizabeth Posey and sentenced to 29 years to life in prison.

On July 12, 2023, Mr. Posey filed a petition to have his murder conviction vacated and be resentenced to a lower sentence pursuant to a passed resentencing statute that took effect January 1, 2019 (PC 1172.6), which provides a process for accomplices convicted of first- or second-degree murder, under either a felony murder or natural probable consequences theory of liability, to petition the court for resentencing.

The murder of Elizabeth Posey took place on April 19, 1996. The jury found true that Mr. Posey fatally shot his wife at their north Napa home.

After hearing arguments presented mid-November by DDA Agnes Dziadur and the defendant’s attorney, the Honorable Judge Langhorne agreed with the Napa County District Attorney’s Office and denied Mr. Posey’s petition for sentencing relief.

People v. Lotu Tatagamatau Osotonu

A Napa jury convicted Lotu Tatagamatau Osotonu, age 50, of possession of a controlled substance with firearm, being a prohibited person in possession of a firearm, being a prohibited person in possession of ammunition, transportation of a controlled substance, and possession for sale of a controlled substance.

The jury additionally found the defendant guilty of special allegations including use of a weapon; large quantity of contraband; prior prison term; prior strike; and aggravating factors. Mr. Osotonu is due back in court for sentencing on December 4, 2023, 8:30 a.m., in Department 5 of the Napa County Superior Court. Napa County DDA Rolando Mazariegos prosecuted the case against Mr. Osotonu on behalf of the People.
People v. Joseph Michael Velazquez

A Napa jury convicted Joseph Michael Velazquez, age 33, of resisting a peace officer.

The defendant was originally charged with hit and run, however, Napa County Superior Court Judge Joseph Solga declared a mistrial on that charge after the jury deadlocked. In addition, the Honorable Judge Solga found that Mr. Velazquez violated his probation.

Mr. Velazquez is scheduled to return to court for sentencing on December 8, 2023, 8:30 a.m., in Department 5, of the Napa County Superior Court.

DDA Erik Lawrence prosecuted the case against Mr. Velazquez.

People v. David Michael Stander

The California Board of Parole Hearings has affirmed its decision to grant parole to convicted attempted murderer David Michael Stander, age 46. The Board of Parole Hearings' late November decision follows Governor Gavin Newsom's request for the full Board to review the decision to parole Mr. Stander based on a public safety concern, a concern that the gravity of the current or past convicted offenses may have been given inadequate consideration, or on other factors (PC 3041.1).

The Board of Parole Hearings originally granted Mr. Stander parole on June 14, 2023. Mr. Stander stood convicted of the stabbing and carjacking of a 68-year-old Good Samaritan, Ed Barkhurst, who picked up Mr. Stander and his co-defendant on February 5, 1996, after the pair was involved in a car accident. Mr. Barkhurst brought Mr. Stander and his accomplice to his home, provided refreshments and the use of a telephone, and offered to drive them back to Fairfield. In return, Mr. Stander stabbed the innocent victim in the back several times with a knife and left him for dead. Mr. Barkhurst was airlifted for emergency surgery and made a full recovery after 12 days in the hospital.

Mr. Stander pled in 1996 to attempted murder, carjacking, and use of a deadly weapon. The Honorable Judge Ronald Young sentenced him to six years to life in prison. While in prison in 1999, Mr. Stander was sentenced to 12 consecutive years in state prison based on two separate stabbing incidents of fellow inmates. He pled to two counts of assault with a deadly weapon while a prisoner at Pelican Bay. Mr. Stander was denied parole in 2017 and 2020, but the Parole Board advanced both hearing dates on its own motion, citing change of circumstances.

Assistant District Attorney Paul Gero appeared at the June 2023 hearing and argued against the release based upon the cruelty and callousness of the attempted murder and carjacking, his continued lack of insight into the attempted killing, his violent conduct in prison and the unreasonable danger he presents to the community should he be paroled. The Parole Board however granted Mr. Stander parole in a hearing conducted via videoconference at Mule Creek State Prison.

Governor Newsom’s referral to the full Board, made October 6, 2023, noted Mr. Stander’s continued violent conduct while incarcerated and inconsistent statements he made to an evaluating psychologist regarding his sobriety date, which the psychologist deemed relevant to his current risk level. Governor Newsom requested the Board to assess whether Mr. Stander has demonstrated that he has the insight and coping skills he will need to maintain his sobriety, avoid negative peer influences, and desist from violent conduct if released on parole.
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