



Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office

Kelly Hoover
Public Information Officer
(805) 681-4192

Date: 10/31/2016
Time: 2:00 p.m.

News Release

Sheriff's Office Warns Public About Recent Virtual Kidnapping Schemes

Santa Barbara — The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office would like to alert the public about a recent spike in "virtual kidnapping" extortion calls on the Central Coast of California. These virtual kidnapping schemes have been attempted in both Santa Barbara County and San Luis Obispo County as recent as September and October of 2016.

Over the past decade, several FBI offices, along with many state and local law enforcement partners, have received reports from the public regarding extortion schemes, often referred to as virtual kidnappings. These schemes typically involve an individual or criminal organization who contacts a victim via telephone and demands payment for the return of a "kidnapped" family member or friend. While no actual kidnapping has taken place, the callers often use co-conspirators to convince their victims of the legitimacy of the threat. For example, a caller might attempt to convince a victim that his daughter was kidnapped by having a young female scream for help in the background during the call.

Callers, sometimes represent themselves as members of a drug cartel or corrupt law enforcement. They will typically provide the victim with specific instructions to ensure the safe "return" of the alleged kidnapped individual. These instructions usually involve demands of a ransom payment and instructions usually require the ransom payment be made immediately and most often by wire transfer. These schemes involve varying amounts of ransom demands, which often the amount will decrease at the first indication of resistance.

Most schemes use various techniques to instill a sense of fear, panic, and urgency in an effort to rush the victim into making a very hasty decision. The criminal's success depends on this generated urgency and fear. They know they only have a short time to exact a ransom payment before the victims and their families unravel the scam or authorities become involved.

Criminals often use social media to gather information and track their potential victims. The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office would like to remind the public to be cautious regarding the amount of personal information posted on social media.

To avoid becoming a victim, look for these possible scam indicators:

- Callers go to great lengths to keep you on the phone, insisting you remain on the line.
- Calls do not come from the victim's phone.
- Callers try to prevent you from contacting the "kidnapped" victim.
- Multiple successive phone calls.
- Incoming calls made from an outside area code.
- Demands for ransom money to be paid via wire transfer, not in person.

Due to the increased frequency of these scams, if you receive a phone call from someone demanding a ransom for an alleged kidnap victim and you suspect it is a scam, the following course of action should be considered:

- Hang up the phone.
- Immediately contact family members.
- Notify law enforcement.

If you have any question about whether a ransom demand is a scheme or a legitimate kidnapping, contact the FBI or your nearest law enforcement agency immediately.

*Source material from the FBI was used in this release.

###