

Scam Alert – The Fake Kidnapping Scam

Known as the virtual kidnapping scam, this frightening extortion scheme is on the rise in Santa Barbara County. This scheme tricks victims into paying a ransom to free a loved one they believe is being threatened with violence or death. Unlike traditional abductions, virtual kidnappers have not actually kidnapped anyone. Instead, through deceptions and threats, they coerce victims to pay a quick ransom before the scheme is discovered.

Here's how the scam works:

The victim will get a phone call and hear a young female screaming for help. The victim may blurt out the child's name: "Mary, are you okay?" And then a gruff sounding man will get on the phone and say something like, "We have Mary. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. We are holding her hostage. You need to pay a ransom and you need to do it now or we are going to hurt her."

The scammers attempt to keep the victim on the phone so they can't verify their loved ones' whereabouts or contact law enforcement. The callers are always in a hurry, and the ransom demand is usually a wire payment to Mexico.

Red Flags:

- Callers go to great lengths to keep the victim on the phone, insisting you remain on the line.
- Calls do not come from the supposed victim's phone.
- Callers try to prevent you from contacting the "kidnapped" victim.
- Calls include demands for ransom money to be paid via wire transfer to Mexico.

What to do:

- Hang up the phone.
- If you do talk to the caller, don't give out your loved ones' name.
- Ask questions only the alleged victim would know, like the name of a pet.
- Listen carefully to the voice of the alleged victim if they speak.
- Attempt to contact the alleged victim via phone, text, or social media to confirm they are okay.
- Call law enforcement.