

The Seattle Times

Winner of Nine Pulitzer Prizes

Local News

Originally published Friday, June 6, 2014 at 8:23 PM

Phone scam: \$500 fine owed for missed jury duty

A U.S. District Court official says callers are trying to con Seattle residents out of money by claiming they're wanted on federal arrest warrants.

By Erin Heffernan

Seattle Times staff reporter

The phone calls are unnerving: Pay a \$500 fine for failing to appear for federal jury duty or face arrest, recipients are told.

At least two Seattle residents received the threatening calls Wednesday from a man identifying himself as a lieutenant for the "Seattle Federal Warrant Division." The caller claimed that a warrant had been issued for failure to appear for jury duty and demanded payment of an immediate \$500 fine.

The calls are bogus.

"There is no Seattle federal warrant division, and there is certainly no lieutenant," said Melissa Muir, director of administrative services for the U.S. District Court for Western Washington. "We would always ask for payment in person."

The court became aware of the scam after receiving two calls to verify the fines, but Muir suspects more people have received the bogus calls.

"The calls were quite aggressive," she said. "He called multiple times and said he would send someone to the house for an arrest if they didn't pay. One woman claimed she was so terrified that she rushed home to get her checkbook."

The caller provided an outdated home address to indicate why notifications for jury duty through the mail had not been successful. He demanded payment of a \$500 Green Dot MoneyPak, a prepaid cash card frequently used in fraud cases.

The Seattle Police Department has investigated several similar incidents in the past year, including one in March in which callers posed as IRS agents seeking a \$1,900 fine for missed taxes.

In September, a Seattle man was successfully conned out of \$600 worth of Green Dot MoneyPaks by a phone scammer posing as a Seattle police officer.

U.S. District Court has also issued a warning of a similar fake arrest-warrant email scam that has been hitting district courts throughout the country. According to the statement, emails may display a "bogus logo," a case number, charges and demands for payment.

"The emails and the calls we're seeing appear to be exactly alike with a similar intent," Muir said. "But these email scams come and go every so often; the phone calls are more concerning because they were incredibly aggressive and scare people in a way that email does not."

Muir said that anyone receiving one of the calls should contact the U.S. Marshals Service's 24-hour

number, 206-370-8600.

Erin Heffernan: eheffernan@seattletimes.com or 206-464-3249



Want unlimited access to seattletimes.com? Subscribe now!