

## **DHS Officials Issue Warning About Scams Targeting Senior Citizens**

WASHINGTON – U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials issued a recent warning about a scheme that conned dozens of elderly U.S. citizens into being unwitting drug mules to countries with severe penalties for drug-related charges, like Australia and New Zealand. The announcement was made by A. Scott Brown, Acting Assistant Director of Investigative Programs for ICE's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), during a hearing before the Senate Special Committee on Aging.

The average age of the 144 couriers was 59; the oldest of these was 87. The oldest individual conned as a part of this scheme was 97; however, HSI special agents identified him before he left the United States to participate in the endeavor and convinced him to abandon his travel plans because he was likely to be another victim. The victims were recruited via social media, cyber begging and telemarketing fraud. Investigators believe over 30 individuals from the United States remain incarcerated overseas.

“Those who target vulnerable populations, to include our elderly, are among the worst kinds of criminals. Heart breaking does not begin to describe some of these case details,” said ICE Director Sarah R. Saldaña. “It is the job of law enforcement to bring these perpetrators to justice, but it is all of our jobs to teach our own loved ones to be vigilant against these kinds of schemes.”

The ruse entices victims with a promise of an inheritance or business opportunity and the requirement that they fly to various countries to meet with “attorneys” or “business partners,” with all travel and expenses paid by the transnational criminal organization. On the final leg of the trip, the victims are asked to take seemingly harmless items along with them for their business contacts at the next location. Upon arrival and inspection, these innocuous items are found to contain drugs resulting in detention and arrest by local authorities. The drugs are concealed in everything from chocolates, picture frames, tea and markers to canned goods, shampoo bottles, soap and wooden hangers.

To date, HSI and CBP have worked with their foreign counterparts to intercept 144 couriers carrying a total of 272 kilograms of methamphetamine, 209 kilograms of cocaine, 4 kilograms of ecstasy and 11 kilograms of heroin. Fifteen facilitators affiliated with the transnational criminal organization were also arrested.

It should be noted, that while HSI makes efforts to prevent potential elderly couriers from departing the United States, the short window of opportunity and the strong relationship scammers have established with their victims makes this difficult. The recruited individuals are often so engaged with the criminal organization, they do not believe the truth when they are confronted with it because these organizations warn their victims not to believe anyone who approaches them as law enforcement. HSI has warned elderly unwitting couriers concerning their potential role in this scheme, only to have them book travel and be intercepted in another country with narcotics.

While organizations like these will victimize consumers of all ages, backgrounds and income levels, the elderly are disproportionately targeted, according to investigators. Perpetrators take advantage of the fact that elderly Americans may be lonely and not have the Internet savvy to recognize the scam.

*Source: US Immigration and Customer Enforcement*