

## **‘Don’t Be Taken for a Ride’**

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 15 December 2023 05:40

---



### **Advocates encourage 988 reporting of rehab scam contacts**

The holidays are a time for family. But it can be hard to celebrate when family members are absent or worse, missing.

With northwestern New Mexico still battling a scam that lures vulnerable Native Americans into fake rehab homes, advocates are encouraging victims, allies and near-misses to use the 988 mental health emergency line to report encounters with potential scammers.

The state launched the “Don’t Be Taken For a Ride” outreach program in July.

“The purpose of having the 988 hotline is ensuring individuals have a source of a safety connection, a communication line that will allow them to feel comfortable if they want to let anybody know about their experience,” Shelly Begay, the Native American Liaison at the New Mexico Human Services Department, said, “They just need someone to be responsive and respectful on the other end of the line.”

## **‘Don’t Be Taken for a Ride’**

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 15 December 2023 05:40

---

Victims have reported being enticed into vans with promises of food and shelter, then taken to purported rehab facilities in the Phoenix area, where they are essentially held prisoner, but Begay said the local problem has raised awareness of similar scams elsewhere.

“We were first introduced to the seriousness of what was happening in Arizona. Now we see more activity that has spanned across different states,” Begay said.

In many cases the victims were inebriated when they were approached and may have had little ability to resist. Once they arrived at their destinations, they were cut off from their phones and outside communication while the scammers accessed their public benefits and raked in money for services they never provided.

While the scam made national headlines, those might not reach the most vulnerable population. Many of the victims are homeless, and the unhoused are often unphoned and unplugged as well. They may not have access to traditional information channels.

The “Don’t Be Taken For a Ride” campaign includes bilingual warnings that run on English- and Navajo-language radio stations including KTNN, and encourage listeners to report any suspicious contact. The reporting party need not be the victim – family members and allies may also report incidents to the 988 line.

“Often, you may get individuals who don’t feel comfortable coming forward. Sometimes that may mean reaching out to a family member,” Begay said.

Community groups are a big part of the awareness campaign.

“Our community outreach team is really focused on the ground. They have been able to work directly in our tribal communities where there is more prevalent activity,” Begay said. “They are trusted individuals that would be able to talk not only in their language, but have an understanding of how vulnerable the population is.”

## **‘Don’t Be Taken for a Ride’**

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 15 December 2023 05:40

---

The scammers have not been caught, although Arizona launched a review of sober living facilities and started pulling funding of those found to be out of compliance with state law – nearly 200 as of October. One man was indicted for alleged “patient brokering” in Arizona in early November and eight more were arrested later that month.

So far New Mexico’s 988 line has received only three tips about the rehab scam, HSD spokesman Tim Fowler said. But he emphasized that the hotline is there to address any type of crisis.

“If you or anyone you know is in crisis, in any sense of the word, that’s why 988 is there to call, chat, text and have somebody who can listen to you and provide some help,” he said. “That includes if you’ve seen something that doesn’t look right and you want to make sure that somebody else knows about that and it can be followed up on.”

By Holly J. Wagner  
Sun Correspondent