



Authorities warn of regional fraud exploiting Native Americans

The calls started coming in to local law enforcement agencies about a year ago, usually from family members wanting to report a relative missing.

While that in itself may be frightfully common among Native people, these disappearances are different. They are part of a regional fraud scheme targeting vulnerable Natives.

The Gallup Police Department has handled 32 cases suspected to be connected to the fraud. Of those, 18 have been closed and 14 remain open, Chief Erin Toadlena-Pablo said during a press conference held May 17. Twenty of those cases were opened last year, the rest this year. The city has also taken on 19 related cases from other jurisdictions.

“Early on our officers knew we had a problem,” Toadlena-Pablo said, noting that reports were bubbling up from community service officers who frequently interact with street people.

Even if someone is itinerant, homeless or dealing with sobriety issues, relatives often know their patterns. It’s not unusual to not hear from that person for days at a time, but those relatives know when it’s been too long.

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Sadly, that may be the first indication that scammers have “recruited” – read abducted – a vulnerable family member. That’s when the search begins. Families are forced to expend time, money and resources to go out and look for their missing kin.

Most often, family members have been left to search for their missing loved ones, unaware that they may have been lured into a van with food and alcohol on the spot and promises of substance abuse treatment and shelter at their destination.

From there, the victims are transported to group homes known as pop-up rehab facilities in the Phoenix, Ariz. area. The scammers may change their victims’ names or other information to apply for public health and welfare benefits the victims never receive.

Those who refuse may be dumped on the street hundreds of miles from home, with no resources or contacts to get back.

Others who remain in the pop-up homes may face physical abuse. They are forbidden to speak their native language under threat of having their phones taken away.

“I was completely astounded, especially when I talked to our Chief of Police. It really made the hair on the back of my neck stand up,” Gallup Mayor Louie Bonaguidi said during the press conference, which announced cooperation among local, state, tribal and federal authorities.

While agencies collaborate to try to stop the fraud and what is loosely called recruitment, a viral video has surfaced that shows an alleged Navajo-speaking scammer trying to lure a man into a van.

The man was talked out of getting into the van by a bystander who was recording the incident.

Scammers, it has been reported, have used the Navajo language to gain trust with their targeted victims.

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“That’s disheartening because we do have a generation of speakers that are unable to effectively translate to our Diné people,” Navajo Nation Council Delegate Dr. Andy Nez said.

Nez emphasized that anyone that reports being targeted by the scammers will not be “blamed or shamed” over their personal circumstances, including substance abuse or nontraditional gender identity.

He also offered to help with translating or doing voiceovers for public service announcements.

The encounters may happen in remote areas of the Navajo Nation or on populated city streets in Gallup, Albuquerque, Farmington, New Mexico, or Phoenix, where witnesses have reported vans skipping from bus stop to bus stop looking for targets.

Often the victims are in a diminished capacity at the time and have little will or ability to resist.

Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley’s voice broke when she spoke of receiving a call three weeks ago from the family of a man who has been missing for three months after making what should have been a routine visit to Gallup for medical reasons.

“Ever since then he has not been back home. Usually he does a one-day trip, hitchhikes into town for dialysis or to donate blood,” she said.

Curley and others are afraid that people may not seek help or legitimate services they need because the scam has dashed their trust.

Meanwhile, the criminals have proved elusive, not least because the crimes cross multiple jurisdictions, including state lines. It took a little time for law enforcement agencies to put the pieces together to realize the scope of it and start working together.

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Suspects were first described as two African American men, then one, then two again, working with a Navajo man. Later reports have indicated a non-medical transport service may be involved.

“These cases have crossed state lines and have been referred to the FBI,” Toadlena-Pablo said. She stressed that Gallup PD won’t turn away any missing person report because of jurisdiction, and the agencies are sharing information to solve the crime.

Gallup Police, Navajo Nation Police, Zuni Police, McKinley County Sheriff’s Office and New Mexico State Police have met twice, last November and last month in Fort Defiance, Ariz. to share information.

“A lot of people don’t have access to the internet or cell phone usage, so the outreach was really important,” Toadlena-Pablo said.

If you think a family member or friend has been targeted by the scam, call the Gallup Police Department at (505) 863-9365.

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