

# Office of the Hunterdon County Prosecutor

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## **MEDIA RELEASE – AUGUST 17, 2017**

### **HUNTERDON COUNTY PROSECUTOR WARNS OF “VIRTUAL KIDNAPPING” TELEPHONE SCAM**

Hunterdon County Prosecutor Anthony P. Kearns, III, is alerting the public to a nationwide telephone scam that is increasing in popularity. The phenomena has been dubbed “virtual kidnapping” by the FBI and is sweeping the nation. In the last two months two reported incidents have been reported here in Hunterdon County. Often the crime goes unreported and the victims are be bilked out of large sums of money.

The scam begins with a random or targeted call to an unsuspecting recipient. The caller tells the victim that a family member, usually a spouse or child, has been kidnapped and demands a ransom be paid. The ransom commonly ranges from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars. The caller orders the target to remain on the phone which prevents them from calling the specified family member. Often an indiscernible voice may be heard in the background pleading for the targeted caller to pay the ransom. Many times sounds effects suggesting the hostage is being beaten are heard.

The victim is then ordered to obtain cash and to wire transfer the funds to a specified location. In both incidents in Hunterdon County the victims were told that the funds were to be sent from a local Walmart store to Walmart stores in Puerto Rico. Scammers have also directed victims to local pharmacies that have money remittance services.

Scammers often mine social media and the internet for personal information. Others are very proficient at eliciting information unknowingly from the person that is targeted.

The FBI has provided a few common denominators that may indicate that the kidnapping call is fraudulent:

- Incoming calls do not come from the kidnapped victim’s cell phone.
- The caller will not let you speak directly to the kidnap victim.

- The caller will go to great lengths to keep you on the phone preventing you from calling the kidnap victim.
- The ransom can only be paid utilizing a wire transfer service.

The FBI recommends that if you do receive a call of this nature that you should immediately hang up and call that family member.

According to Prosecutor Kearns, “These scammers are unscrupulous people who exploit the emotions of families that believe a loved one has been kidnapped. It is our intent to educate the public to prevent any further victims from falling prey to these heartless individuals.”

Anonymous tips can be submitted by calling Crime Stoppers at 1-800-321-0010 or by going to [www.crimestoppershunterdon.com](http://www.crimestoppershunterdon.com), or text messaging “HCTIPS” plus your tip message to 274637 (CRIMES). Tipsters can also download the free mobile app “Tipsubmit” and select Hunterdon County to submit anonymous tips via text messaging. All tips are anonymous and kept confidential.

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