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SDDVA Secretary Whitlock's October Column – Veterans, Beware of Scammers

We've all seen or read news stories about individuals and companies taking advantage of veterans and their dependents. Many veterans and/or their dependents receive benefits through the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs, their states or other entities, and as such are seen as a valuable resource to scam.

As veterans' advocates, it is important we are able to identify these scammers and make our important customers aware that these individuals exist. Below is a list of common scamming tactics that are taken against active duty service members, veterans and their dependents:

- Access to government programs but must first pay a fee or provide personal information.
- High interest loans for veterans in crisis in exchange for future disability or pension payments.
- Charging veterans for access to their military records or government documents/forms.
- Selling plans to veterans to increase their pension payments by qualifying for Special Monthly Pension (Housebound/Aid and Attendance).
- Phishers impersonating VA Officials soliciting veterans' personal information in the guise of updating their records.
- Scammers position as veteran's charity organizations pressuring veterans to donate or give them personal information.

These are just examples of how individuals and entities may attempt to take advantage of veterans. As you are all well aware, the means in which scammers try to gain access to benefits or information are essentially endless.

Sadly, often those closest to veterans are the ones who attempt to or do take advantage of them by gaining access to their benefits.

What should veterans do?

- Hang up if unsolicited calls from the VA are received.
- Check the credentials of financial advisors or veterans related charities prior to investing/donating.
- Use a VA-accredited representative that is available at no cost to the veteran, or their dependents for all veterans related questions/issues/claims/etc.
- Ask questions, if it doesn't feel right it probably isn't.

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Veterans should not:

- Give sensitive information, such as personal or financial information, over the phone/email/in-person unless you know who you're dealing with and you trust they have your best interests at heart.
- Wire or give money to someone you don't know.
- Pay for copies of your military records.
- Allow anyone access to your military or VA information who does not have an authorized power of attorney.
- Pay up-front for access to benefits or benefits assistance. Certain attorneys are authorized to represent veterans before the VA, but there is process for fee agreements.

Authorized agents and powers of attorney can be found at: va.gov/ogc/apps/accreditation.

If you have any questions or suspect a veteran, you assist is being taken advantage of please contact our team at the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs (605.773.3269).

Greg Whitlock, Secretary
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs