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LAW DIRECTOR ADVISORY SEXTORTION SCAM

Several Parma residents have become prey to a “sextortion” scam. Reports of this type of cybercrime, which is a form of sexual exploitation and coercion, are increasing nationwide.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) classifies sextortion as a form of online blackmail where explicit images or videos of victims are used to extort additional photos or videos, sexual favors, and sometime money from victims. This crime can involve hacking into a victim’s computer, webcam or mobile devices, or “catfishing” – where predators lure unsuspecting victims into fake online relationships and coerce them into sharing nude photos or videos of themselves. Criminals will threaten to share the photos or videos about the victim with their friends or family, or post them on social media or pornographic websites unless the criminal’s demands are met.

Demands for initial payments average \$500, but have been reported as high as \$15,000. Payment is often demanded in the form of cryptocurrency such as Bitcoin as it is virtually impossible to trace or recover.

To protect yourself from being exploited online, we recommend the following:

- Install anti-malware applications on all computers and mobile devices.
- Encrypt all sensitive documents and media, and never store such files on the cloud.
- Cover your webcam when not in use to ensure privacy.
- Turn off your computer and all mobile devices when not needed. Remember that cameras on hacked devices may be activated remotely.
- Ignore emails and chat messages from unknown parties, and avoid clicking on suspicious links and email attachments.
- Use strong passwords and two-factor authentication when available.
- Do not communicate with anyone who is not readily willing to share their name, occupation and other identifying information. Validate the person’s identity before escalating your online relationship.

If you become a victim of sextortion, don't panic and take the following steps immediately:

- Confide in a trusted source. Shame is the criminal's currency. Telling a friend or family member, or seeking out professional help will alleviate much of the pressure and shame the victim feels.
- Do not communicate with the criminal and never give in to their demands. They will continue to blackmail you if you do.
- Take screenshots of all communication with the criminal and preserve all evidence. Make note of account IDs, URLs, Western Union or MoneyGram Money Transfer Control Number (MTCN), and other such information.
- Deactivate temporarily all social media accounts and report the scam to network administrators.
- File a report with the Parma Police Department. You may contact the Parma PD at 440.885.1234.
- Contact the FBI's Cleveland office at 216.522.1400 to report the crime. Also, file a report with the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center at <https://www.ic3.gov/default.aspx>.
- Call the Ohio Attorney General's Office at 800.282.0515 to file a complaint. The OAG's Bureau of Criminal Investigation is the state of Ohio's official liaison to Interpol, the world's largest police organization which will pursue criminals operating in foreign countries.

In addition to the above actions, victims may engage private investigative firms that specialize in educating and assisting victims of sextortion and other cybercrimes.