

TESTIMONY OF ADRIENNE OMANSKY

**Before the
United States Senate
Special Committee on Aging
March 7, 2018**

GOOD AFTERNOON SENATORS, FELLOW TESTIFIERS AND GUESTS. THANK YOU SENATOR COLLINS AND SENATOR CASEY FOR INVITING ME TO THIS IMPORTANT HEARING. I AM ADRIENNE OMANSKY, FOUNDER OF THE STOP SENIOR SCAMSSM ACTING PROGRAM. IT IS AN HONOR TO BE HERE TO PROVIDE TESTIMONY ON HOW MY PROGRAM HAS HAD AN IMPACT ON STOPPING SENIOR SCAMS.

I AM A RETIRED TEACHER OF THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS WITH THE LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT. AS A TEACHER OF PROGRAMS FOR OLDER ADULTS AND ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES, I TAUGHT CLASSES IN HEALTH AND FITNESS AND A UNIQUE CLASS THAT I DEVELOPED IN TRAINING OLDER ADULTS IN COMMERCIAL ACTING. IN MY ROLE AS A TEACHER, I WAS IN A POSITION TO HEAR MY STUDENTS' CONCERNS AND ONE DAY, OVER COFFEE, THE CONVERSATION LED TO THE SUBJECT OF SCAMS THAT THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED. SOON, THE SENIORS IN THE ACTING CLASS WERE EXCITED ABOUT USING THEIR ACTING SKILLS TO EDUCATE THEIR PEERS. IT WAS 2009, AND THE STOP SENIOR SCAMSSM ACTING PROGRAM WAS BORN.

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT EMBRACED OUR NEW EDUCATION PROGRAM AND WAS ESPECIALLY SUPPORTIVE WHEN WE COLLABORATED WITH SEVERAL LOS ANGELES CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS TO DESIGNATE MAY 15TH AS SENIOR FRAUD AWARENESS DAY IN THE CITY .

IN 2015, OUR SCHOOL DISTRICT ELIMINATED ALL THE PROGRAMS FOR OLDER ADULTS AND OUR STOP SENIOR SCAMSSM ACTING PROGRAM WAS IN JEOPARDY. WE WERE ABLE TO CONTINUE AS A TOTAL VOLUNTEER GROUP WITH THE HELP OF OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS. WE WERE ASSISTED WITH TRANSPORTATION NEEDS AND REHEARSAL SPACE FROM THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES. SENIOR MEDICARE PATROL AND THE FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION PROVIDED US WITH EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS AND OUR PROGRAM CONTINUED.

IN THE LAST FEW YEARS, WE HAVE GROWN AND HAVE PERFORMED IN ABOUT THIRTY VENUES PER YEAR, FROM A SMALL VETERANS GROUP, TO THE CONVENTION CENTER WITH OVER 1000 SENIORS. WE HAVE 26 SKITS IN OUR REPERTOIRE. WE ALWAYS INCLUDE THE MEDICARE, IRS AND I WON A PRIZE SKITS. IN EVERY VENUE, THE SENIORS HAVE EXPERIENCED MANY OF THE SAME SCAMS, INCLUDING THE IRS AND GRANDPARENTS SCAMS. ONE OF OUR OWN CAST MEMBERS, JANEY, WAS A VICTIM OF AN INSIDIOUS FORM OF THE GRANDPARENTS SCAM. THE SCAMMER GOT INFORMATION FROM HER FACEBOOK PAGE AND THREATENED TO KILL HER GRANDDAUGHTER IF SHE DIDN'T SEND THE MONEY BEING DEMANDED. JANEY SENT THE MONEY. SHE FELT EMPOWERED BY TELLING HER STORY TO OTHER SENIORS.

OUR PROGRAM IS ALWAYS EVOLVING, CHANGING, ADDING AND CREATING. WE HAVE HELP IN CRAFTING OUR SKITS FROM A PROFESSIONAL THEATER AND PERFORMANCE ARTS CENTER. ALTHOUGH WE USE MANY ASPECTS OF THEATER IN OUR SKITS INCLUDING PUPPETS THIS IS NOT ENOUGH TO EDUCATE OUR AUDIENCE. WE COLLABORATE WITH PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO MAKE SURE OUR INFORMATION IS ACCURATE.

AFTER EACH SKIT, OUR FORMER JUDGE FRANCINE LYLES, OR ONE OF OUR EDUCATORS, EXPLAINS THE SCAM TO THE AUDIENCE. THE FINALE OF THE PROGRAM INCLUDES ALL CAST MEMBERS SINGING THE "JUST HANG UP" SONG AND EACH ACTOR STEPS FORWARD AND TELLS THE AUDIENCE IF THEY WERE A VICTIM OR TARGET OF A SCAM. AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE PROGRAM THE AUDIENCE IS ASKED TO FILL OUT A COMMENT CARD TO TELL US WHAT THEY LIKED OR MAY SUGGEST. BOOKMARKS FROM SENIOR MEDICARE PATROL AND THE FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION ARE ALWAYS GIVEN OUT. IN ADDITION, MATERIALS ARE AVAILABLE FROM THE CITY AND COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEYS' OFFICES. .

WE OFTEN MEET PEOPLE THAT WE CANNOT FORGET. THE THREE 90 PLUS YEAR OLD VETERANS WHO WERE VICTIMS OF THE SAME SCAMS. THE 99 YEAR OLD MAN WITH THE RED BERET. WHEN HE WAS ASKED IF HE ENJOYED THE PROGRAM, HE SAID HE UNEXPECTEDLY LEARNED A LOT. HE CAME TO THE CENTER TO MEET A YOUNGER WOMAN. THEN THERE WAS THE YOUNG MAN WHO BROUGHT HIS GRANDMOTHER TO THE SENIOR CENTER BECAUSE SHE WAS ABOUT TO SEND MONEY TO GET BACK HER DRIVERS LICENSE. THEY BOTH APPROACHED ME WITH A LETTER THAT INDICATED THAT SHE COULD GET HER DRIVERS LICENSE REINSTATED IF SHE WOULD SEND A LARGE SUM OF MONEY TO THE ADDRESS ON THE LETTER. TO ASSURE HER THAT IT WAS A SCAM, I TOLD THEM TO GO TO THE DEPARTMENT OF MOTOR VEHICLES AND HAVE THEM LOOK AT THE LETTER. THE LADY SEEMED VERY UPSET WITH HER GRANDSON AND VERY EMBARRASSED. I ASSURED HER THAT WE WERE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT AND THERE WERE OTHERS WHO HAVE BEEN SCAMMED OUT OF MONEY FROM A SIMILAR LETTER. THEY RETURNED TWO HOURS LATER, WHEN OUR PROGRAM WAS OVER AND TOLD ME THAT THE LETTER WAS A SCAM. I SAW THE RELIEF ON HER FACE AS SHE JOINED OUR OTHER SENIORS IN A POST PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION. LAST YEAR, I MET A LADY WHO WAS SHEDDING TEARS DURING OUR

PERFORMANCE. SHE WAS SITTING NEXT TO ME. SHE CONFIDED IN ME THAT SHE WISHED SHE HAD SEEN OUR PROGRAM A WEEK EARLIER. SHE LOST A LARGE SUM OF MONEY ON A "VACATION" SCAM. SHE WAS SAVING HER MONEY TO SURPRISE HER HUSBAND WITH A CRUISE TO CELEBRATE THEIR 60TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY. I ASKED IF SHE WOULD TELL HER STORY TO OUR AUDIENCE. SHE GOT UP AND I STOOD BESIDE HER. THE AUDIENCE WAS QUIET, ALL EYES ON HER. SHE GAVE THE SCAMMER HER CREDIT CARD NUMBER OVER THE PHONE TO PAY IN FULL FOR THIS TRIP AND HE TOOK \$500 OUT OF HER CHECKING ACCOUNT. THERE WAS NO CRUISE. SHE TOLD EVERYONE THAT SHE TRUSTED THE YOUNG MAN WHO TOLD HER THAT SHE SOUNDED JUST LIKE HIS GRANNY.

OUR AUDIENCE MEMBERS OFTEN TELL US WHAT THEY LEARNED FROM OUR PROGRAM .

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THEM?

WE HAVE LEARNED THAT SCAMS ARE UNDERREPORTED BECAUSE SENIORS SOMETIMES DO NOT KNOW WHERE TO REPORT THEM, ASHAMED OF REPORTING THEM, AND SOMETIMES THINK IT JUST WILL NOT HELP.

WE LEARNED THAT THEY ARE EMBARRASSED TO TELL THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS, INCLUDING THEIR SPOUSES. THEY ARE SOMETIMES AFRAID TO TELL LAW ENFORCEMENT.

WE LEARNED THAT THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO TELL THEIR PEERS THEN ANYONE ELSE.

WE LEARNED THAT SOMETIMES SENIORS DO NOT LIKE PROFESSIONAL FRAUD PREVENTION PROGRAMS BECAUSE THEY OFTEN FEEL CONDESCENDED.

WE LEARNED THAT SENIORS WHO LIVE IN ASSISTED LIVING FACILITIES ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO SCAMS BECAUSE THEY ARE LONELY AND THEY WANT TO WIN MONEY TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN OR GRANDCHILDREN.

WE HAVE LEARNED THAT SENIORS WHO HAVE BEEN SCAMMED HAVE EMOTIONAL SCARS.

WE HAVE LEARNED THAT ANYONE CAN BE A VICTIM, REGARDLESS OF EDUCATION, RACE, GENDER, NATIONAL ORIGIN, OR SOCIAL ECONOMIC BACKGROUND.

WE HAVE LEARNED THAT SENIORS ARE THE ONES TO STOP SENIOR SCAMS.

WE HAVE LEARNED THAT THEATER IS A WONDERFUL PLATFORM TO EDUCATE

WE HAVE LEARNED THAT PEER-TO-PEER EDUCATION WORKS!

THE PEER TO PEER MODEL PROVIDES A COMFORTABLE AND SAFE ENVIRONMENT WHERE THEY CAN IDENTIFY WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE SIMILAR LIFE EXPERIENCES, BOTH AS TARGETS AND AS VICTIMS OF SCAMS.

THE PEOPLE WHO ARE DISSEMINATING THE INFORMATION ARE NON JUDGEMENTAL. THIS GIVES THE SENIORS IN THE AUDIENCE THE OPPORTUNITY TO OPEN UP AND HONESTLY SHARE THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES.

THE THREAD THROUGHOUT OUR PEER TO PEER PRESENTATION IS THAT "ONLY YOU AND I CAN PREVENT SENIOR SCAMS." WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER!