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**Consumer Protection Panel Will Address Ways to Protect Against Scams**

**Hosted by the City of Easthampton and the Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation**

The Easthampton Mayor’s Office will join the [Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation (OCABR)](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/office-of-consumer-affairs-and-business-regulation) and the Easthampton Police Department for a virtual forum designed to inform and empower consumers on the latest scam tactics and how best to avoid them. **Mayor Nicole LaChapelle** and **Undersecretary Edward A. Palleschi** host this event and give an overview of programs and services available from their respective government offices.

The panel will include: **Easthampton Police Detectives Eric Alexander, Andrew Beaulieu** and **Mark Popielarczk** as well as **OCABR Community Outreach Manager Robin Putnam**. This one-hour webinar will feature experts from each of the partner organizations as they discuss a range of scams related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the upcoming tax season. Attendees will leave with a more robust understanding of how fraudsters operate, and the relevant tools to combat them. This virtual event will be held on **Thursday, 4/8/21, at 12pm**. It is free and open to all. [Register here](https://www.mass.gov/forms/ocabr-and-the-easthampton-mayors-office-present-how-to-recognize-and-avoid-tax-and-covid).

“A lot of people, especially seniors, have felt isolated during the past year due to the pandemic making them vulnerable to scammers. It’s important to remember that government agencies will not call or email to ask for your social security or bank account number,” said **Easthampton Mayor Nicole LaChapelle**. “We want to make consumers aware of resources that are in place to protect them from those who seek to do them harm or otherwise take advantage of them.”

During the forum, attendees will be able to ask questions of the experts and receive real-time responses. The webinar will cover things like COVID-19 related scams, tax scams, and identity theft as well as inform consumers about resources that each agency offers from hotline phone numbers to how to check the reputation of a vendor. Participants will learn to recognize signs of common scams, empowering them to be better able to avoid falling prey to fraudsters.

According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), imposter scams - where the perpetrator pretends to be someone else in order to get consumers to give them money - are the most common type of scams. Last year, the FTC logged nearly 500,000 complaints about this type of scam totaling $1.2 billion dollars in loss to consumers. Victims on average lost about $850.

“The Easthampton Police Department frequently receives calls from residents concerned about suspicious telephone calls and scams. These fraudulent activities are not unique to our community, and unfortunately have become quite common,” said **Easthampton Police Detective Eric Alexander**. “We feel that by identifying the most common types of scams directed at consumers and how to avoid them, we are offering a layer of protection to assist in minimizing exposure to their personal and/or financial information.”

Robocalls are another way that consumers are defrauded. Americans received just under 46 billion robocalls in 2020. This was a decline of almost 22% from 58.5 billion calls recorded in 2019. Scammers can spoof the phone number they are calling from to make it look like one you know so when they ask you for money they seem legitimate. Consumers reported losing more than $3.3 billion to fraud in 2020.

“Criminals are creative and have found ways to stay active during the pandemic. Fraudulent activity reported to my office includes sales of fake COVID-19 test kits, scams that offer early access to the vaccine for a fee, phony COVID-19 vaccine websites made to look like they belong to drug manufacturers, and stimulus check scams in which consumers are asked to share bank and other personal information in order to have quicker access to these funds,” said **Edward A. Palleschi, Undersecretary of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation**. “OCABR seeks to inform and empower Massachusetts consumers and in doing so protect them from scams.”

**About the Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation**

The Office of Consumer Affairs & Business Regulation empowers Massachusetts consumers through advocacy, community outreach, education programs, and partnerships while ensuring a fair and competitive marketplace for the business its five agencies regulate. In advancing its mission, OCABR continually strives to find a balance between protecting consumer rights and supporting business vitality in the Commonwealth.

**About the City of Easthampton Massachusetts**

Easthampton is a model small city of the 21st century located in the fertile Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts. It retains its mill town soul while fostering innovation. Community members treasure the abundant resources, dynamic downtown, and vibrant neighborhoods. By adapting, evolving, and making tough choices, Easthampton is sustainable, inclusive, balanced, and a great place to live.

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