How Fraud Impacts Idahoans

Scholarship Contest First Place Winner

Laynie Jensen

Nampa, Idaho

How does fraud impact Idahoans? The financial effect is obvious; the statistics are shocking, with up to twenty-five cents of every dollar and approximately $950 per family paid annually to cover the cost of others' greed. Just think of it -- almost $1,000! What family couldn't find something constructive to do with those extra dollars, especially these days? Yet less reported, but at least as impactful, is the human and ethical cost; no statistics there!

Stories in the paper such as the Idaho Falls couple who conspired to commit insurance fraud certainly catch readers' attention. It's easy for individuals to tell themselves that hard fraud such as this is perpetrated by a more hardened element of society. Just like in the movies or on TV, these crooks often manage to give themselves away or are turned in by others.

Hard fraud isn't the only fraud, however. Soft fraud is what happens when people stretch the truth "a little bit" to get more at someone else's expense. Since the 'someone else' is often seen as a corporate entity (such as an insurance company), individuals can justify their actions in their own mind. They would be shocked and offended to be accused of stealing. Yet it is indeed a form of stealing because we all have to pay.

Soft fraud is insidious because anyone can -- and does -- do it. In many cases, individuals committing the fraud are not even aware they are doing it. They only see it as getting a "little extra" for their suffering because, after all, they deserve it.

How often have we heard the lament that morals are eroding and things aren't "the way they used to be"? The rise in soft fraud is an indication that this may, in fact, be true. An attitude of entitlement -- the feeling of "it's okay, I deserve it" -- is becoming more evident not only nationally, but in Idaho as well.

According to Dale Dixon, president of Better Business Bureau of Southwestern Idaho, Idaho is now ranked number 19 among the states for fraud. The question is raised: who can anyone trust? Sadly, some of our most vulnerable citizens, such as the elderly, sometimes learn the hard way that the answer to that question is: hardly anyone. If someone is asking for information or offering to help us, we have to question motive. We all have to learn to be more discerning and skeptical. We must operate under the principle of "if it seems too good to be true, it probably is".

The good news is that, though a smaller state, Idaho enjoys a reputation for being aggressive in protection of its citizenry and the prosecution of fraud. Much of that is due to the nature of Idahoans and the increased awareness of the issue and different types of fraud. By raising awareness, the state increases the likelihood that citizens will notice and report inappropriate behavior.

Once made aware, Idahoans, on more than one occasion, have noticed and turned in the "bad guy". Whether it be a notorious case such as that of Joseph Duncan or just the guy down the street ripping off his insurance company, observant Idahoans notice and turn in wrongdoers. Increased awareness results in an increased number of tips. As a result of researching this topic, I myself am more informed and aware of fraud and its effects which is, after all, the mission of the Idaho Fraud Awareness Coalition.

We know fraud won't go away, but an informed citizenry can certainly check its growth. In the meantime, as individuals, we can help spread the word, report infractions and be true to our teachings by behaving honestly ourselves. In the words of William Shakespeare, "to thine own self be true".

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