

Opening Statement
Senator Susan M. Collins
Special Committee on Aging

“Do You Know What Is in Your Suitcase?
How Drug Traffickers Are Deceiving Seniors to Smuggle Contraband.”

February 10, 2016

Good afternoon. One of the top priorities of this Committee is to wage the battle against criminals who are constantly trying to swindle American seniors out of their hard-earned savings.

These scammers are endlessly inventive. Last year alone, our Committee’s Fraud Hotline received 1100 calls on more than 30 different scams from victims located in every state. At the top of the list was the IRS Impersonation Scam, followed by the Jamaican Lottery, Deceptive Robocalls, Computer Tech Support Fraud, Identify Theft, Grandparent Scams – the list goes on and on.

Regrettably, today we add to the list a new scam brought to our attention by federal law enforcement officials and one of my constituents. And this one is particularly pernicious.

As we will learn from our witnesses, international criminal cartels have begun to use unsuspecting American seniors as “mules” to smuggle narcotics across international borders. Tragically, at least 145 victims have been arrested by foreign governments as a result of this scam, and 44 of them remain incarcerated overseas.

Typically, the criminal organizations behind this intricate scheme draw seniors into a web of deceit using what I call a “predicate scam” like the “Romance Scam,” in which the con artist develops a personal relationship, usually on-line, with the unsuspecting senior.

Once the seniors are ensnared, the criminals then deceive them into smuggling drugs by asking them to travel overseas, where they are given packages with unknown contents to carry across international borders. The scammers give reasons that appear plausible to many seniors. Typically, the criminals pick-up the tab for the seniors’ travel expenses, which is one way they convince their victims they must be legitimate.

The criminals also make the international travel arrangements for their victims, which is another key to how the scam works. Instead of sending the senior on a direct flight from the United States to his or her destination, the criminals create a complicated itinerary that requires the senior to stop somewhere overseas, often for days at a time.

During this waylay, the seniors are told that, for some elaborate reason, it is important they carry a package or an extra suitcase with them on the next leg of their journey. Unbeknownst to the senior, the package or suitcase he or she is asked to carry has drugs carefully

hidden inside. Even if the senior were to look inside, he or she might not notice anything unusual.

Then, as the seniors try to clear customs overseas, disaster strikes: officers uncover the contraband and arrest them on charges of drug trafficking. Instead of reaching their destination – and finally getting to greet the “lover” they met online, or recovering the funds promised them by “Nigerian bankers”, they find themselves imprisoned in a foreign jail alone and thousands of miles away from home.

The criminals who set this chain of events into motion are cruel, but also very, very clever. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is that seniors and their families become aware of their techniques, and take action to protect themselves and their loved-ones from these heartless criminals. We also need a vigorous and determined effort by federal law enforcement, not an easy task given the challenges posed by international boundaries.

I look forward to learning more about this terrible new fraud from our witnesses, and what can be done to combat it.