

# LEGAL EASE



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## Phone scams are similar

Unscrupulous scammers have branched out from pretending to represent the IRS or Microsoft. A recent article in *Forbes* speaks of a message from the Social Security Administration (SSA) about phone scams from thieves pretending to be from SSA. This scam is similar to the IRS phone scams that have been so prevalent. The author, Kelly Phillips Erb, refers to a warning from the Acting Inspector General of Social Security, Gale Stallworth Stone, about an ongoing phone scam. (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyphillipserb/2018/07/20/social-security-issues-warning-about-scams-similar-to-those-irs-phone-scams/#4ad1e63f4d7a>).

Scammers try to convince Social Security beneficiaries to give up personal information over the phone. One robocall version gives a warning that the beneficiary's social security number has been suspended for suspicion of illegal activity. The message is, if you don't call back, your assets or benefits will be frozen until the issue is resolved. In another case, someone claiming to be from SSA asks to confirm personal information such as a social security number (SSN), the "new" Medicare number, address and date of birth. According to Stallworth Stone, robocalls from scammers pretending to be from government agencies continue to be problematic because they are cheap and easy, and they allow thieves to get to the largest number of victims possible. That is why the IRS calls continue; the Medicare number change spawned a whole new class of vulnerable consumers.

Although the IRS has repeatedly stated that they will never contact taxpayers by telephone, SSA employees do occasionally reach out by telephone for customer service purposes. Stallworth Stone warns people to be cautious and to avoid giving any personal information, such as SSN or bank account numbers over the phone or internet, unless you are certain of who is receiving it. Be aware of suspicious calls from unknown sources. If you receive a suspicious call from someone alleging to be from SSA, report that information to Office of the Inspector General (OIG) at 1-800-269-0271.

In the article, Erb shares some tips from the FCC in dealing with robocalls. If the caller or recording asks you to press a button to stop getting the calls, just hang up. Scammers use this trick to identify potential targets. Do not respond to any questions, especially to those that could be answered with 'yes'. Your phone company may have call blocking tools available to you, and apps can be downloaded to your mobile device to block unwanted calls. If you already use robo-blocking technology, it can help to let that company know which numbers are producing unwanted calls so that they can help you and others block those calls. Register your number on the 'Do Not Call' list to block telemarketing calls.

The IRS says that phone scams are still "a major threat to taxpayers." The Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (TIGTA) reported that they have become aware of over 12,716 victims who have collectively paid over \$63 million as a result of phone scams since October 2013. Remember that the IRS will *never* contact anyone by telephone.

The author of the article states "**when in doubt, assume it is a scam.**" If you doubt that a call is legitimate, hang up and call back using an official number. Don't use the caller ID number on the phone, as those can be spoofed. To reach the IRS, call 1-800-829-1040. To contact Social Security, call 1-800-772-1213. Don't engage with scammers or thieves; just hang up.