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SCAMS & FRAUD

No, Mavis Wanczyk Is NOT Trying to Give You Money

Criminals pretend to be big-time lottery winners who'd like to share their wealth

By Matt Alderton, AARP

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Mavis Wanczyk has likely changed her name or gone deep underground since she made headlines for winning a record \$758.7 million Powerball jackpot in 2017. After accepting the stunning windfall, the Chicopee, Mass., health care worker quit her job at age 53, and... who knows? Now the only trace of her online appears to be in the form of Mavis Wanczyk impostors perpetrating scams in her name.

The typical scam begins with someone claiming to be Wanczyk contacting you to offer you a cash grant from her vast pool of winnings. The catch: To receive the funding, you must first send a processing fee or money for taxes. You soon realize there's no grant on the way, and your money is gone.



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One Facebook [page in Wanczyk's name](#) includes her photo and the grammatically challenged introduction, "I'm Mrs. Mavis Wanczyk, the mega Powerball winner of \$758 Million in Mega Millions Jackpot. I'm only doing my part in people's life. I am giving out out of the money I won to my followers on this page. Best of Luck."

Lottery scams: all too common

[Lottery and sweepstakes scams](#) were the fifth most reported kind of scam reported to the FTC in 2024, with almost 3,500 complaints and \$29.2 million in reported losses (the actual numbers are likely far higher, considering that scams are notoriously underreported).

Wanczyk isn't the only lottery winner whose name is used in these crimes, but she "was probably the first...and she's still probably the most common," says Steve Weisman, senior lecturer of law at Massachusetts' Bentley University, creator of the blog [Scamicide.com](#) and author of *Identity Theft Alert: 10 Rules You Must Follow to Protect Yourself from America's #1 Crime*. Weisman thinks she's popular because "there's been more news about her," so "people recognize the name."

Other lottery winners that scammers are known to impersonate include Dave Johnson, Cristy Davis, Christine Wilson, Julie Leach, Cheng "Charlie" Saephan and Patricia Busking.

There's also Mike Weirsky, an unemployed New Jersey man who in 2019 walked into a convenience store in Phillipsburg, N.J., and purchased two Mega Millions lottery tickets for \$2 each. Distracted by his phone, Weirsky, then 54, left them behind at the checkout counter. Lucky for him, a good Samaritan turned them in to the salesclerk, so he was able to pick them up the next day. That evening, he found out he'd won the \$273 million jackpot. Scammers took note.

Warren "Mike" Kellogg, 66, of Aurelia, Iowa, is one recent victim of a Weirsky impersonation scam. He says that he felt like he'd won the jackpot himself when he encountered a post from Weirsky on Facebook in January. According to the post, Weirsky wanted to pay it forward by sharing his wealth with people in need. He was therefore choosing individuals at random online and gifting them \$100,000 to help them with bills, debt, medical expenses and other financial hardships.

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"All you had to do was click on the post, and then the money would be delivered to your door by FedEx within two or three hours," Kellogg says. "I thought, 'That's exciting.' But then he demanded that I go to the store and buy an Apple gift card for \$50 to pay gift tax for the IRS."

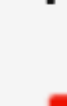
Then they told him it would cost him another \$15,350 to get the cash. "That made me hit the brakes," he says.



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Variations on the lottery-winner impersonation scam

Sometimes scammers claiming to be beneficent lottery winners do send a check — a fake one, says Jared James, a former certified public accountant for PricewaterhouseCoopers and founder of Lotto Edge, a website that analyzes scratch-off games and prize data to help lottery players understand their odds of winning. "In another variation of the scam, they'll [send a fake check](#) and say, 'We'll send you your winnings. You just need to deposit the check and then wire back to us some money to cover taxes or attorney's fees.' So, you do that, but in a few days the check bounces and you're out the money that you wired to them," James explains.

Scammers sometimes ask for personal information, like your bank information and Social Security number, instead of money. "That data is very useful to a criminal," says Ally Armeson, executive director of FightCybercrime.org, a nonprofit organization devoted to fighting online scams. "If they get your bank account number in order to transfer your winnings or the donation that they're making to you, they can drain your account. And if they get your Social Security number, they can [steal your identity](#) and do all sorts of terrible things with it."

How to protect yourself from lottery-winner impersonation scams

You can spot and avoid even the most convincing lottery impersonation scams by keeping in mind a few common red flags — many of which apply to all varieties of lottery scams:

Free money: "The bottom line is: No one is giving away their lottery money," Weisman says. Aaron Rose agrees. "Always trust your gut," says Rose, security architect manager at Check Point Software Technologies, a multinational provider of cybersecurity solutions. "If something seems too good to be true, 99.9 percent of the time, it's too good to be true."

Unsolicited contact: Be wary of any unsolicited outreach, including messages from supposed lottery winners and organizations claiming you've won a lottery or sweepstakes that you didn't enter in the first place.

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Taxes and fees: In the unlikely event that you do win money or receive an altruistic windfall, you won't have to pay to obtain it, Armeson says. "Winning a prize is free. That's why it's a prize," she says. "You [might be] hit by taxes, but that's later on."

Nontraditional payment methods: Being asked to pay fees in and of itself is suspicious, but being asked to pay those fees through an unusual payment channel is even more suspect. "If a scammer asks for money, they will ask for it through something like a wire transfer, [gift cards](#) or, more recently, cryptocurrency because those payment methods can't be easily traced or clawed back to the victim," Armeson says.

Urgency: As with many scams, a false sense of urgency is "a huge red flag," according to James. "They're trying to get you to act quickly and not think about it," he says.

What to do if you've been targeted

If you've been targeted by a lottery-winner impersonation scam, cut off communication immediately but preserve all the evidence you can — including emails and screenshots of text messages or social media exchanges — because it could help with future prosecutions.

Report the crime to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) at [ic3.gov](#) and to your local police department.

Contact the free AARP Fraud Watch Network [Helpline](#) (877-908-3360) for assistance and support

Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.

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