

Common Ground Conference
November 19, 2014
Seattle, Washington
Keynote Remarks of Commissioner Terrell McSweeny

Good morning. Thank you so much for being part of our Common Ground Conference for the Northwest region. I want to thank Washington State Attorney General Bob Ferguson and his office here in Seattle for working with the Federal Trade Commission in co-hosting this event. I also want to thank some of the folks who have worked so hard on putting this conference together: Julie Mayer, Krista Bush, and Eric Setala from the FTC, and Michele Ferazza and Shannon Smith from the Washington Attorney General's office. Let's give these folks a round of applause for putting together this terrific gathering.

These Common Ground conferences are among the most important events the FTC holds all year. The information sharing and collaboration generated by Common Ground is so valuable to the work that we all do.

I want to highlight some of our successes together since the last Common Ground meeting. Last month, the FTC, the Federal Communications Commission, and all fifty states and the District of Columbia announced coordinated settlements with AT&T over cramming charges on mobile phone bills. This FTC settlement will provide \$80 million in redress for consumers.

In July, the FTC, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and 15 states worked together on Operation Mis-Modification, an effort that resulted in 41 separate actions being brought against fraudulent mortgage modification operations.

These bogus businesses collected upfront fees from distressed homeowners in exchange for promises to modify existing loans. Consumers would pay as much as \$4,000 in fees, but inevitably, received no relief in terms of their mortgage. In some cases, the phony modification companies even instructed homeowners to cease communications with their mortgage lenders.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, the Montana Department of Justice, and the Better Business Bureau of Eastern Washington, North Idaho, and Montana provided invaluable investigative assistance to the FTC to help us take action against a Missoula-based operation that allegedly crammed \$70 million worth of charges on the cell phone bills of unwitting consumers.

These are just a few examples of numerous types of cases that the FTC and the states have recently worked on together, which include everything from fraudulent telemarketers claiming to raise money for charities, to bogus government grants and business opportunities, to scams that conned consumers into paying for phony discount cards for health care or prescription drugs.

We have also formed new partnerships to provide valuable assistance, like our work with AARP to address concerns around prize promotion and lottery scams aimed at older consumers. As part of the program, the FTC partnered with the AARP Foundation to refer individual peer counseling to consumers over the age of 60 who have called the FTC's Consumer Response

Center to complain that they had been victims of certain frauds, including lottery, prize promotion, and family emergency scams. The AARP call center used for this effort is located here in Seattle and AARP Washington State Director Doug Shadel was instrumental in setting up the program.

But, as all of you know all too well, fraudsters and scammers continually adapt to new technologies to target victims and invent new schemes to insinuate themselves into vulnerable communities. That's why conferences like this one are so important – and why I want to spend a few minutes talking about some of the new tools we're developing at the FTC to help protect consumers.

In September, we announced our Every Community initiative. The basic premise of this effort – that fraud is a problem in every community – is nothing new to anyone in this room. Young or old, native or immigrant, veteran or civilian, scams harm consumers regardless of where they live or the language they speak.

The best way to combat fraud is to empower consumers and foster collaboration across stakeholder groups, so that we can quickly identify new scams and work together to stop them. All too often consumers are unaware that they can come complain to us, to their state AG, to their local Better Business Bureau – and that their complaints are taken seriously.

That's why we are redoubling our efforts to reach out to underserved communities, or groups that might be particularly targeted. Our Division of Consumer and Business Education has found that merely translating materials from English into a native language isn't always effective in conveying information to an immigrant community. So we are retooling consumer education pieces to make them culturally aware and meaningful. As an example, we have begun using graphic fotonovelas for some of our Spanish language outreach.

In addition, this fall we launched the “Pass It On” campaign to help guide active older adults in avoiding various scams. The idea is simple. Instead of telling seniors what not to do and alarming them, the campaign is geared toward empowering them not only to protect themselves, but also others in their community.

Last year we started working with the Department of Defense, the CFPB, state attorneys general, the Better Business Bureau and others to launch our Military Consumer project. This effort provides online resources for our military families on everything from managing your credit while a loved one is deployed to giving advice on auto loans or avoiding scams that too often target military families. Regrettably our military families often experience frauds and unsavory business practices – from unconscionable debt collection to fraudulent charitable solicitations or scholarship and financial aid scams for those continuing their education.

Finally, last month President Obama signed as part of the BuySecure Initiative an Executive Order designed to strengthen consumers' financial security and provide better assistance to victims of identity theft. The President provided us with new resources to bring together identity theft information from a variety of agencies – including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) – and improve the resources for consumers on IDtheft.gov so that remediation is an easier and more seamless process.

All of our consumer education materials are free to use – they have no copyright – so I invite you to use them in any way that fits your mission. Our goal is to get them in the hands of as many consumers as possible. Together we can make sure that they do.

I believe the shared mission we have – protecting Americans from frauds and scams – is one of the most important tasks of government. As new technologies allow scam artists to move seamlessly across jurisdictions or target groups in new ways, cooperation between us is more important than ever.

At the FTC we want to hear from you. The door is open. Thank you all for being here today.