Officer: Local residents victims.

Ryan Randolph would rather deal with residents before they've fallen for a scam instead of when they become victims.

So would the rest of the Gothenburg Police Department where Randolph is an officer.

"We're trying to avoid that and make people self aware to handle these scams themselves," Randolph said.

His advice is simple:

Destroy any mail that looks suspicious.

If you receive a letter saying you've won money, a car or other item of value, don't give out personal information such as your name, social security number or bank account numbers.

Never sign documents including your name and mail them back. A common ploy is for scammers to get your signature by saying they need it to insure the money won't be used for illegal activity or terrorism.

Never give anyone money to cover taxes, insurance, shipping or storage fees. Taxes are paid by you to the government. This is done after you've received any winnings.

Legitimate lotteries don’t charge insurance, shipping or storage fees and aren’t stored at security houses. Lottery money is never shipped in cash.

If you receive a cashier’s check, don’t cash it because it’s most likely stolen or forged.

For instance if you cash a check for $5,000 and mail $2,500 to the scammer, he or she becomes $2,500 richer and you will be responsible for $5,000.

Never send money via Western Union or Money Gram on lottery winnings or eBay transactions because those are unsecured transfers.

The entire amount will be your loss and the person who picked up the money will most likely never be caught. These scammers are professionals who use fake IDs to make pickups from transfer centers.

Unfortunately, local police officers have been contacted by numerous Gothenburg residents who have fallen victim to scams.

Randolph tells of a resident who received mail asking the resident to cash a fraudulent check and mail part of the money to the sender and keep the remainder.

When bank officials declared the check was no good, Randolph said the resident had to repay the entire amount of the fraudulent check.

“A lot of these checks have fake watermarks and are good forgeries,” he said. “It’s a sad situation when we get a call from a person who says ‘I owe money but don’t know how to pay it,’ ”

Officers believe the money was sent overseas where many scams originate, Randolph said.

That makes finding the perpetrator nearly impossible, he said.

“If you become a victim of a scam, there is very little we can do for you as a police department,” he said. “It’s extremely difficult to get cooperation from foreign countries regarding fraud.”

Often scammers will tell would-be victims they are from the United States but Randolph said they usually are not.

Randolph said police officers know scams like the one described happen every day but not everyone reports them, especially if they fall for the scam.

“Many more go unreported by shamed victims so it’s your job to protect yourself,” he said. “And if you are a victim of fraud, report it to the police department immediately.”

Sometimes scammers use a legitimate company to try and commit fraudulent activity.

Randolph told of a recent scam operation in which scammers used a real company’s letterhead—Sun Life Financial, Inc.—on mail they send.

“The problem is that we’re talking huge amount of money—millions and millions are being sent out of the country based on fraud,” he said. “If you send money overseas, you can kiss it good-bye.”

Usually all law enforcement can do is shut off the cell phone number of the scammer, Randolph

said.

In many cases, he said scamming takes place in rooms where people are gathered with laptop computers sending e-mails.

“Some of these are in the United States but most are overseas where it’s harder to track them down and prosecute,” he explained. “With Internet and cellular phones, you don’t have to be extremely creative to do it.”

He added that federal investigative agencies often have a dollar limit on what they investigate.

“Victim fraud of $10,000 probably won’t be substantial enough to investigate but maybe $100,000 would,” he said.

Although common victims the department has dealt with are older, Randolph said they come in contact with people of all ages who have allowed themselves to be scammed.

“And some are repeat victims,” he said.

The best advice Randolph can give is this:

“If it’s too good to be true, you should shred or delete it,” he said. “If you have questions, don’t do anything until you’ve contacted the police although you will usually be asked to destroy the document as you are not a victim of a crime until you give away money or sensitive information.”

For more information or to report suspicious activity, contact the police department at 537-3608.

ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com 308-537-3636