



For Immediate Release
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*******CONSUMER ALERT*********CONSUMER ALERT*******

**MADIGAN WARNS OF PHONY PRIZE WINNINGS CLAIMING TO
BE FROM “THE OPRAH SHOW SUMMER SWEEPSTAKES”**

Letters and Checks Part of Large Scam

Chicago – Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan today is warning consumers about unsolicited mail they may receive announcing that they are among a group of third category winners of a recent sweepstakes sponsored by “The Oprah Show” and Walgreens.

According to Harpo Productions, Inc., which produces *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, several legitimate sweepstakes were held in the summer of 2006 through Oprah.com but all winners were previously notified. Harpo Productions, Inc. has not sent any letters in 2007 announcing additional winners for this sweepstakes. The sweepstakes letters being mailed to consumers have a check enclosed that is made payable to the letter recipient. The checks look real but are actually counterfeit. Consumers should disregard these letters and should not attempt to cash the checks.

The letters and checks are props in an especially devastating form of consumer fraud—conning check recipients into believing the checks are real, convincing recipients to deposit the checks into their banks, and even persuading the recipients to wire their own money to the con artists.

Madigan said that Harpo Productions, Inc. has become aware of the check cashing scam over the last week through phone calls and e-mails from consumers who have received these letters. In this case, letter recipients are asked to deposit the enclosed third party checks which total \$2,850. The checks appear to be authentic and even clear the bank. The letter states that the check covers a clearance fee that will allow them to collect a lump sum award of \$81,561. Recipients are asked to contact a telephone number and directed to wire \$2,600 via Western Union to a third party. The third party is, in fact, part of the scam and the consumer will never receive a sweepstakes prize.

“With the large number of Oprah’s fans worldwide, we are concerned that their excitement at the opportunity of receiving a financial prize from Oprah may result in fans responding to this unauthorized offer,” Madigan said.
“Consumers should be alarmed whenever they receive a request to send money to anyone they do not know.”

In check cashing scams, victims receive a realistic-looking phony check and do not discover it is fake until after depositing it and wiring money back to the thief. As a result, victims can be left legally liable to their banks for thousands of dollars. The scammers use high quality printers and scanners to make the checks look real. Some of the checks contain authentic-looking watermarks. These counterfeit checks are printed with the names and addresses of legitimate financial institutions. Even if the bank account and routing numbers listed on a counterfeit check are real, the check still may be fake.

If the consumers do as instructed, they can be liable to the bank for all of the money they wired in addition to any of the proceeds they have already spent.

Madigan said that many fake check scam victims mistakenly believe that a check must be good if their bank accepts the check for deposit and makes the funds available to them. Banks are required by federal law to make funds from a check available to consumers within a relatively short period of time. However, Madigan noted, “making the funds available to you is not the same as confirming that the check is authentic. It takes days, even a week or more, for a bank to determine that a check is a forgery.”

Madigan said Illinois consumers who have sent money can contact her office’s Consumer Fraud Hotline at 1-800-386-5438 (TTY: 1-800-964-3013). The Spanish-language Hotline number is 1-866-310-8398. Consumers outside of Illinois can file a consumer complaint by downloading the complaint form at www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov/consumers/conscomp.pdf. In addition, Madigan said out-of-state consumers should report the occurrence to local authorities, their state Attorney General’s Office and monitor their financial accounts for any suspicious activity.

- 30 -

[Return to April 2007 Press Releases](#)