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# Nigerian Sentenced for Defrauding Seniors Via Romance Scams

## Targeted Women in Illinois for Exploitation

### Romance Scams

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Ogheneofejiro Godswill Uzokpa has been sentenced to serve a substantial prison term of seven years after he was found guilty of victimizing a dozen elderly women through elaborate romance schemes. Uzokpa, who pleaded guilty to charges of conspiracy and wire fraud, engaged in a calculated and deceitful operation that preyed on vulnerable individuals seeking companionship and love.

The timeline of Uzokpa's fraudulent activities spanned from around March 2020 to February 2021, during which he, along with his unindicted co-conspirators—who were all residing in Nigeria—specifically targeted Effingham County in Illinois, as detailed in the indictment. Uzokpa utilized various forms of communication, including email, phone calls, and other messaging services, to reach out to individuals in the United States. His primary targets were elderly women, whom he approached with charm and false pretenses. Uzokpa often masqueraded as an American doctor or an individual holding a prestigious and lucrative profession, claiming to be living and working abroad, which added an air of credibility to his fabricated persona.

According to prosecutors, Uzokpa was adept at gaining the trust of those he contacted, skillfully forming romantic relationships with them over time. His targets, who were often lonely and seeking connection, felt a genuine romantic bond with him. In some instances, they even accepted a false marriage proposal that he presented, believing they were embarking on a meaningful relationship. This emotional manipulation was a crucial part of Uzokpa's strategy, as it allowed him to exploit the feelings of affection and trust that his victims had developed for him.

Once Uzokpa had successfully secured the emotional attachment of his targeted contacts, he would begin to weave elaborate and fabricated stories about experiencing sudden financial crises. For instance, he would claim to have been locked out of his bank account due to unforeseen circumstances, which he presented as an urgent situation requiring immediate financial assistance. According to the indictment, he would then ask his victims to send him money to cover various expenses or processing fees that he claimed were necessary to resolve his financial predicament. Uzokpa employed various methods to coerce his targets into sending money, including checks, gift cards, electronic money transfers, and cashier's checks. He even managed to manipulate some of his victims into sending funds directly to his co-conspirators, further complicating the web of deceit.

The indictment reveals that Uzokpa's co-conspirators played a significant role in this fraudulent scheme. Once the victims sent money, these accomplices would then transfer a portion of the funds to Uzokpa's bank accounts in Nigeria. The funds were not only sent through traditional electronic fund transfers but also through Bitcoin transactions, showcasing the sophisticated methods employed by Uzokpa and his associates to obscure the trail of the money. Although the money sent by the victims was ostensibly meant to be a loan, Uzokpa never returned any of the funds, leaving his victims devastated and financially ruined.

Romance scams, such as the one orchestrated by Uzokpa, are unfortunately not uncommon and can target individuals of all ages and genders. These scams can originate from various sources, including emails, text messages, and cold phone calls. However, in recent years, there has been a notable increase in scams perpetuated through connections made on dating applications and social media platforms. According to a consumer advice article published by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the year 2021 saw a record high of \$547 million reported in losses due to romance scams. This staggering figure was confirmed by the FTC to be over 80% higher than the losses reported in 2020, highlighting the growing prevalence of such fraudulent activities.

These scams typically follow a similar pattern and can be relatively easy to spot if individuals are aware of the warning signs. To help protect potential victims, the FTC has provided several key points to remember when navigating online relationships:

- Scammers often claim to be from the host country but assert that they are currently working or living outside of the country. They may say they are engaged in humanitarian work, serving in the military, or working on an oil rig, all of which serve to create a narrative that justifies their need for financial assistance.
- Scammers are skilled at saying all the right things to gain your trust and affection. However, they will often introduce a sudden crisis that they claim can only be resolved with money, such as unexpected medical expenses or legal troubles that require immediate financial intervention.

By remaining vigilant and informed, individuals can better protect themselves from falling victim to such deceitful

schemes, ensuring that they do not become another statistic in the growing epidemic of romance scams.

Scammers may even present themselves as having a “successful” business venture that they want to include you in, such as enticing opportunities in cryptocurrency investments, often requiring a small start-up fee to get involved. This tactic is designed to lure individuals into a false sense of security, making them believe they are part of an exclusive investment opportunity.

- Scammers typically direct payment through wire transfers or gift cards, as these methods make it exceedingly difficult to recover funds once sent. They often apply pressure tactics, urging you to act quickly, which significantly reduces the time you have to think critically about the situation and assess the legitimacy of the offer.
- If you suspect that you have fallen victim to a scam, it is crucial to act swiftly. Call the company you used to send the money and report the scam to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) as soon as possible. Prompt reporting can help authorities track down the scammers and potentially prevent others from becoming victims.

In addition to the substantial 7-year prison sentence Uzokpa received for his fraudulent activities, he was also ordered to pay a hefty sum of \$329,470 in restitution for the financial harm he caused to his victims, as detailed in his sentencing documents. This restitution is intended to provide some measure of compensation to those who suffered losses due to his deceitful actions.

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