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Comic strip addresses Latino con victims

By Jeannie Kever

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

THE BAD GUYS are after Tia Carmen. Comic strips long have tackled social issues, so the story line running through "Baldo" the next two weeks in this and other newspapers should come as no surprise. Aunt Carmen, innocently cruising the super-market, is targeted by con artists.

The Latin lotto scam has been reported across the United States since first surfacing in Texas about seven years ago. Now it has hit the funny pages.

The scam works like this: Con artists approach someone, usually an older Hispanic, with what they claim is a winning lottery ticket that they say they can't use, often because of their immigration status. "They ask for help, requesting a "security deposit" while the target collects the person's winnings.

There is no national tally of money lost to the swindle, but the Texas Lottery Commission estimated that the con game had netted more than \$3 million in Texas alone by 2004, when the commission stopped counting.

The scam versus the truth

The scam: "This is a winning ticket, but I need money to claim it."

The truth: Once the ticket is bought, no money is required to claim a prize.

The scam: "I can't cash in my winning lottery ticket because I'm not a U.S. citizen."

The truth: Citizenship is not required to claim a lottery prize.

TEXAS LOTTERY COMMISSION

The amount is now closer to \$4 million, said Leticia Vasquez, spokeswoman for the Texas Lottery. Even that's a low-ball number, because so many people don't report that they've been scammed," she said.

Law enforcement reports indicate most con artists are from Central and South America and were recruited in their home countries, Vasquez said.

"Baldo's" cautionary story line began Monday with a woman approaching Tia Carmen: It continues through March 24.

Co-creator Hector Cantu, an editor at the Dallas Morning News, said that he hopes to warn people to be careful.

"The key to preventing this is awareness," he said. "It's upsetting when you read news stories about 'tias' and 'abuelitas' losing their money because all they want to do is help someone out."

Cantu approached the National Council of La Raza, a civil rights and Hispanic advocacy organization, after deciding to tackle the scam. The group, based in Washington, D.C., found that the issue fits with its emphasis on financial empowerment.

As the story line nears an end, it will include a tag line directing readers to the organization's Web site, www.nclr.org, for information.

Latinos are targeted because

they tend not to have bank accounts, said Luisa Grillo-Chope, economic-security policy analyst for NCLR. Banks provide a safeguard with tellers who might question a senior making a large withdrawal, she said.

Instead, some Hispanics "tend to carry around large amounts of cash. This is a scam taking money away from people who don't have a lot," she said.

"Baldo" features 15-year-old Baldo Bermudez; his father, Sergio; his younger sister, Gracie; and his Tia Carmen. It appears in more than 200 U.S. newspapers.

The comic strip is one more way to spread information, Grillo-Chope said.

"When they're reading about this family, people will apply that to their own community. Utilizing this type of medium makes sense."

The Latin lotto scam isn't "Baldo's" first public-service project. In 2004, Cantu and illustrator Carlos Castellanos teamed up with the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project to encourage voter registration for the presidential election.