

**FAST of Vermont**  
**February Monthly Meeting – 2/11/2021**  
**Organizing Survivor Support Groups**

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**Resources on romance and other financial scams**

Baker Fraud Report: [www.bakerfraudreport.com](http://www.bakerfraudreport.com)

BBB Report on Romance and other Scams: <https://www.bbb.org/scamstudies>

<https://stopelderfraud.ovc.ojp.gov/>

<https://www.ic3.gov/>

<https://www.fcc.gov/>

**Minutes**

**1:02pm** – Attendee introductions

**1:11pm** – Debbie Deem opens the meeting, introduces a survivor of a romance scam in 2015; and Sarah Nelson, who organizes a financial scam support group based in Ventura County, CA. Sarah discussed developing the curriculum for this group; working with other local organizations.

**1:17pm** – Debbie Deem introduces AARP Romance Scam video; video is shown to attendees. Debbie adds that reporting to ic3.gov is important.

**1:25pm** – Survivor discussed life after a romance scam. Law enforcement was initially in active contact, but contact became less frequent overtime. Held out hope that money would be recovered. Survivor was contacted by Debbie about six months after she was scammed, and they discussed starting a support group.

Sarah discusses working with survivors. Importance of meeting survivors where they are – interrupting a survivors narrative, or insisting that they are being scammed while they have not accepted that, can be hugely damaging. Parallels to SA/DV work.

Difficulty of losing family connections – children, etc. may disengage with victims of romance scams. Romance scams may also come after the loss of a family member.

Debbie asks: what are the biggest challenges of maintaining a support group? Sarah: often, this is the only place survivors feel comfortable talking. It's easy to get off track, and difficult to maintain the productive therapeutic practice. One challenge is balancing older and newer members who may be at wildly different stages of processing and healing. Hardest part is getting people to come – group is now taking place in an online format, which adds additional challenges.

**1:40pm** – questions from attendees.

**Leah Burdick asks:** Thank you for telling your story, it was very powerful. I am an elder law attorney, I work with elders who have been scammed. Do you have any thoughts on specifically what you would have liked me to say to you when doing my interviews and strategizing on how to help? Jumping off of what Sarah Nelson said, can you expand on what I can say that would make you feel supported and heard? Thank you.

Survivor: when you're going through it, it's incredibly emotionally difficult. Referrals to support groups are important. Leah and survivor discuss supporting clients. Supports that referrals to counseling are the most important thing. Sarah suggests being up front about your limitations – say that you don't always know the solution to problems, make sure survivor feels comfortable, and can tell you if they are uncomfortable with something you've done. Debbie adds that the most difficult step is getting a survivor to make the initial contact, so the warm hand-off is crucial.

**Sheri Rockcastle asks:** Are elders romantically scammed on platforms other than on-line? Asking to become clear if outreach should include folks who are not on-line (a more difficult group to reach)

Debbie responds that romance crimes absolutely happen in person and off-line, but the online aspects enable international fraud on a much greater level.

**Shelly Facos asks:** Thank you for sharing your story. Were you able to repair your relationships with family and friends later. and does anyone know what is the percentage (if known) of victims that were able to repair their family/friend relationships resulting from being scammed.

Survivor answers that her close friends were initially very supportive but finding new support groups also very important. Relationships with family were slow to recover, but repaired gradually as she herself healed.

Sarah adds that these relationships are two-way streets – relationships may be toxic to begin with. There's a wide range of outcomes. Sarah's group offers counseling to family as well. Debbie comments that a support group for family would be extremely important.

**Carolyn Thompson asks:** I've heard that scammers look for obituaries and find out all kinds of details about survivors that way - have you guys heard of that?!

Debbie is not aware of this particular avenue being used in romance scams, but certainly in other scams. These are often organized networks of scammers – information sharing, fake platforms, etc.

**2:00pm:** Victoria closes the meeting.