

Collect-call scam rings foul; bills challenged

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Accepting one from Mexico might cost a victim \$50-plus

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SAN YSIDRO — Fearing an accident or other emergency, Rita Sanchotena accepted a collect call from Mexico one recent Saturday morning from a man who said he was calling on behalf of a family member.

The unidentified caller told her some relatives had just crossed the border and were waiting to be picked up from a hotel in San Ysidro.

"I didn't understand what he was saying," said Sanchotena, who works part time at the San Ysidro mobile-home park where she lives. "I kept asking him, 'What relatives?' Then he hung up."

After checking in with family, Sanchotena didn't think much more of the incident until her phone bill arrived one month later with a \$59 charge for the call, which lasted two or three minutes.

She had become another victim among

The scam

An operator calls with a collect call from someone with the same last name. Assuming the caller is a relative, the recipient takes the call.

After talking briefly, the victim hangs up, but by then the call has been billed at rates of \$11 per minute or more.

In some instances, the victim refuses the call but is charged anyway.

SEE Scam, B3

People duped to think calls are from family

a growing number of San Diego and U.S. consumers, particularly those with Spanish surnames, who are getting stuck with large phone bills after accepting collect calls from people claiming to be relatives.

Some believe those profiting from the scam are the owners of pay phones in Mexico, where the calls originate, but no one knows for sure.

"That's what we're trying to figure out right now," said Assemblyman Lou Correa, D-Anaheim, who is working to help consumers who have been victims of the scam. "Who's making the money?"

The California Attorney General's Office is investigating the complaints.

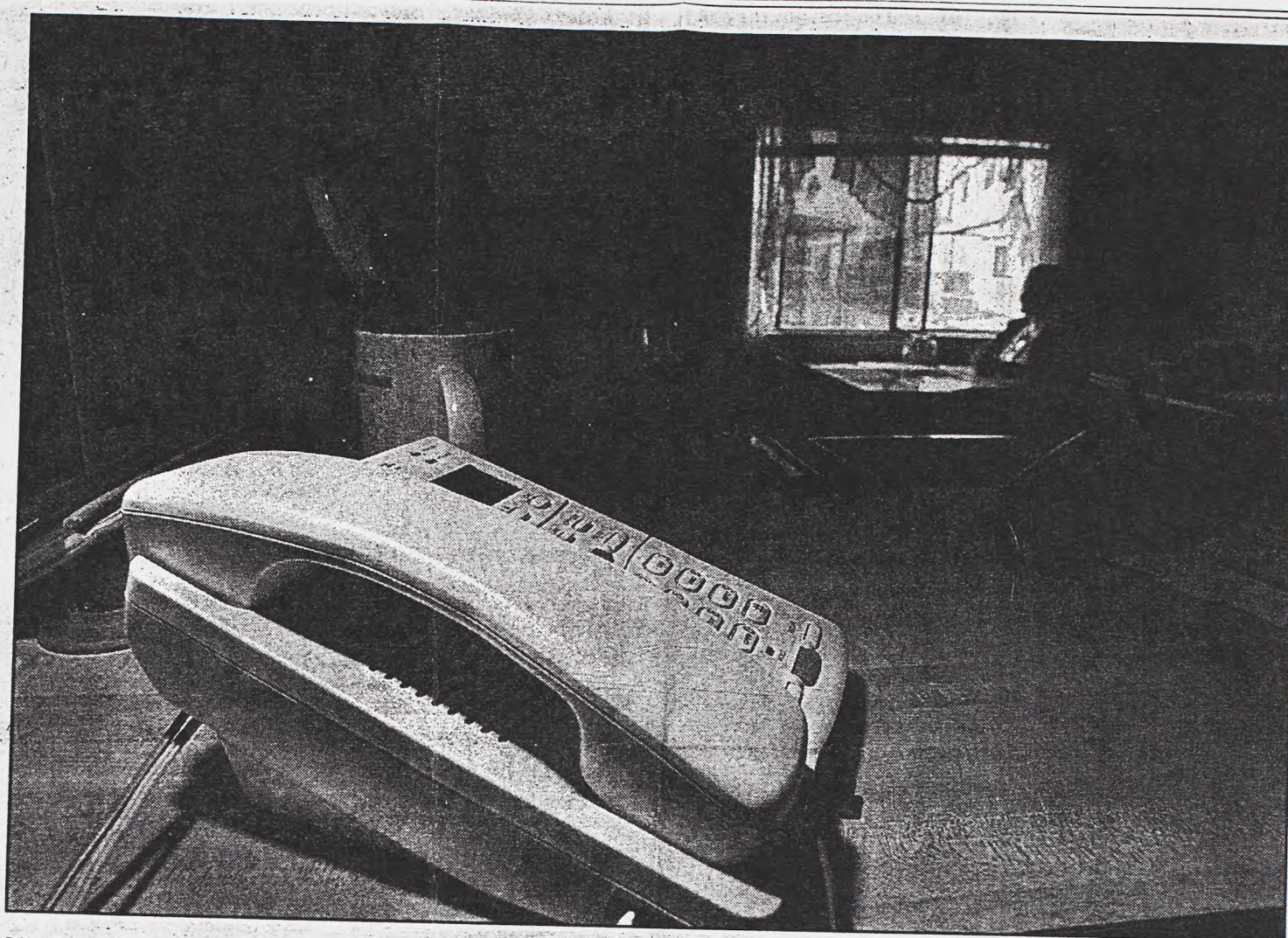
"It is our understanding these bogus collect calls are going on in several states, and we are, as a consumer caution, suggesting that people be very careful when accepting collect calls," said Sandra Michioku, a spokeswoman for the Attorney General's Office. "If you're not expecting it, decline the call."

Michioku urged consumers who feel they have been victimized to file written complaints with her office, the Federal Communications Commission — which also is investigating the matter — the Public Utilities Commission, the local phone company and the billing company of the collect calls.

The San Diego District Attorney's Office said it is referring victims directly to the PUC. Spokesman Armando Rendon said the office is limited in its jurisdiction because the calls are coming from Mexico, but it is aware of the matter.

"We are putting out an advisory in Spanish, warning consumers and advising them to file complaints with the FCC and let them know what is happening," he said.

Correa held a meeting this month in Santa Ana to help



Rita Sanchotena (background) was a victim of an apparent phone scam where she did not know the originator of a collect call from Mexico and was charged a high rate. John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune

Southern California victims of the scam, which he said has affected thousands.

"It literally and figuratively hit home with me," said Correa, whose wife became a victim after accepting a collect call from a man claiming to be Correa. "Then we get a bill for \$60. It's one of the most cowardly and blatant scams I've ever seen."

Typically, an operator calls and announces a collect call from someone with the same last name. The recipient assumes the caller is a relative and takes the call. Many of the callers try to stall for time.

After talking briefly, the victim hangs up, but by then, the call has been billed at rates of \$11 per minute or more. In some instances, Correa said, the victim refuses the call but is charged anyway.

Generally, rates charged for

collect calls to the United States from Mexico are much higher than domestic collect calls. AT&T charges \$4.92 per minute for a collect call from Tijuana. MCI WorldCom's rates are \$8.56 for the first minute and \$3.07 for each minute thereafter.

However, the fraudulent calls from Mexico are being billed at from \$50 to \$57 for a minimum of five minutes, with charges accruing each minute thereafter.

The name of the company that has appeared on several San Diego bills is ZPDI, or Zero Plus Dialing Inc., which is hired by long-distance and operator service companies to process charges for long-distance services.

The company collects call records and forwards them to the caller's local exchange carrier

for inclusion on a consumer's local phone bill.

ZPDI Chief Operating Officer Jacqueline Mitchell said the company is warning consumers and working with long-distance providers to bring these problems to their attention and devise ways to curb the problems.

She had several suggestions for consumers:

"Hang up immediately," Mitchell said. "As soon as you realize it's not the person you thought it was, get off the phone so as not to incur any additional charges."

Before accepting a call, she said, be sure you know the person calling and request secondary identification, such as mother's maiden name, grandfather's name or the age of a

lect call through until the called party verifies knowing the calling party and accepts payment responsibility.

On Wednesday, ZPDI restructured rates that it will allow its customers to charge. No rates are permitted to exceed \$44 for a five-minute minimum plus \$4 for each additional minute, and \$38 for a three-minute minimum plus \$4 each additional minute, Mitchell said.

Although ZPDI does not have the authority to regulate rates for any of its customers, Mitchell said she was forced to control the rates that ZPDI bills on collect calls from Mexico. "No one else is stepping up to the plate," she said. "We felt we had to implement regulated rates."

Mitchell attended the meeting in Santa Ana last week and said she is working with Texas officials, who hope to host a similar meeting there and invite representatives from New Mexico, Arizona, Illinois, Florida, California and any other states where consumers have been affected.

Correa urged consumers not to be afraid to come forward. He advised notifying the telephone company of the scam, filing a complaint against the charges and requesting that the charges be taken off the bill.

Though Sanchotena refused to pay the bill, the collect call she accepted that Saturday ended up costing her more in heartache than the \$59 she was charged.

"I was so scared I called everyone in my family, here and in Tijuana, to make sure everything was OK," she said.

family member.

She also said to ask the operator where the call is from, what the rate will be if you accept the call and if there is a minimum charge for the call.

Last month, Mitchell said, operators for ZPDI's clients were advised not to put a col-