



UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, DC 20580

**Prepared Remarks of Chairman Joseph Simons¹
Protecting Virginia's Consumers: A Common Ground Conference
October 30, 2019**

Good afternoon. I want to welcome all of you to today's program. We are here today to find common ground on how we can leverage our collective resources to address the issues facing Virginia's consumers. The FTC is honored to partner with the Office of the Attorney General of Virginia to discuss these important issues.

I am pleased to see such a wide range of consumer protection stakeholders here. I know we have legal services providers, advocates from community and social services organizations, and representatives from federal, state, and local government agencies. With all of the talent here today, I am looking forward to what promises to be a robust exchange of ideas.

So what are some of the issues facing Virginians? Reports to the FTC's Consumer Sentinel Network say that imposter scams, debt collection, and identity theft are the most-reported issues. In fact, in 2018, more than 56,000 reports came from Virginia consumers, who reported losing \$28 million.² But we also know that those numbers are the tip of the iceberg. The topics on today's agenda cover some of that iceberg.

¹ These remarks reflect my own views. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Commission or any other individual Commissioner.

² FTC Report, *Consumer Sentinel Network Data Book January – December 2018*, at 69 (Feb. 2019), https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/documents/reports/consumer-sentinel-network-data-book-2018/consumer_sentinel_network_data_book_2018_0.pdf.

The first panel covers *Credit and Debt Issues Affecting Servicemembers and Their Families*. In a state that is home to so many military personnel and families, this is an especially important topic. The FTC believes that it is vital for us to serve those who serve, and we do so through both education and law enforcement. We worked with the Department of Defense's Office of Financial Readiness to create MilitaryConsumer.gov, a site that helps give servicemembers and their families the tools to protect themselves and their finances. We also bring cases against unscrupulous people who target members of our armed forces. For example, we brought a case against Sunkey Publishing, which ran sites with names like Army.com and ArmyEnlist.com. Except Sunkey wasn't an official military recruiter. Instead, they took people's information and sold it to post-secondary schools.³ The FTC's settlement stopped these activities, and the sites have since been turned over to the Department of Defense.

Scams Affecting Older Americans is the second panel of the day, and a critical issue for many of us. In fact, the FTC just sent its annual report to Congress summarizing our work to serve older adults.⁴ The report shows that nearly every case we brought during fiscal year 2019 affected older adults in some way. In addition to our enforcement work, the FTC runs a very popular education campaign for older adults called *Pass It On*. This research-based campaign treats older adults as partners who are part of the solution, and not simply victims of fraud. The campaign provides them with resources they can read and "pass on" to family and friends to start conversations about fraud. I am sure you will hear more about it later, but I hope you will visit [ftc.gov/PassItOn](https://www.ftc.gov/PassItOn) to access the campaign materials.

³ See FTC Press Release, *FTC Takes Action against the Operators of Copycat Military Websites* (Sept. 6, 2018), <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2018/09/ftc-takes-action-against-operators-copycat-military-websites>.

⁴ FTC Press Release, *FTC Report to Congress Details Fraud Reports from Older Consumers* (Oct. 23, 2019), <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2019/10/ftc-report-congress-details-fraud-reports-older-consumers>.

Finally, a discussion of *Student Loan Debt* rounds out the day. The FTC is seeing a steady stream of cases on student loan debt relief scams, where companies promise to reduce payments, or sometimes even secure debt forgiveness. But these companies often pocket your money instead of making loan payments. Our recent case against Mission Hills Federal halted this type of scheme.⁵

I want to thank all of you for joining us today. I encourage you to share your knowledge and exchange ideas. Let's see where our work overlaps, and how we can work together even more effectively to protect Virginians.

⁵ See FTC Press Release, *FTC Stops Student Loan Debt Relief Scheme, Charges Operators with Misleading Consumers* (July 11, 2019), <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2019/07/ftc-stops-student-loan-debt-relief-scheme-charges-operators>.