FLORIDA CONSUMER eNEWSLETTER
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Beware of Rental Scams

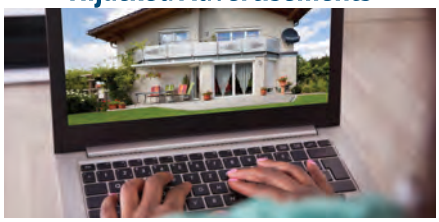
Thinking of moving to a new city? Looking for a vacation rental? Many people will begin their search through online classifieds or search engines. However, that amazing deal that you find online may actually turn out to be a scam. Scammers commonly advertise rentals that aren't available or don't exist, often requesting money up-front before their victims find out the hard truth. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

The following are a few scams that have been making recent headlines:

Phantom Rental

Scammers create a listing for a property that does not exist or is not currently for rent and try to bait you with the promise of low rent in a great location. Rental scam artists often take advantage of neglected, empty houses on the real estate market due to recession-driven foreclosures. Homes that are owned by banks and other financial institutions can take several months and even years to sell. Many of these homes are left unchecked during this period and are sitting targets for the scammers. There have been reported cases of individuals living and paying rent in a house for several months only to later find out that the "landlord" they had been paying was not the true owner of the property.

Hijacked Advertisements



Scammers will search websites that list homes for sale. They will then copy the information from that listing and post it on a different website, with their own email address and contact information. Many unsuspecting victims are lured to these fake listings because of advertised rates well below market value or offered incentives that seem hard to resist.

International No-show

The advertised "homeowner" will explain that they are currently overseas and are unable to meet in person. Victims are then required to send the first and last month's rent, usually by money wire services, which is almost impossible to trace once the money has been sent. Victims may even receive fake keys in the process, only to find out they have been scammed once they get to the property. Victims are sometimes asked to provide a credit application before they can move in. The application often requests personal information such as Social Security numbers, credit history and employment history. The scammers are then able to use this information to commit identity theft.

Tips to Avoid a Rental Scam

- Never send money to someone unless you have verified their identity, preferably in person, or for a property that has not been seen.
- Never wire money to pay for the first month's rent, security deposit or application fee. Wiring money is the same as sending cash, once it has been sent, it is gone forever.
- If the property representative is unable to meet in person because they are out of the country, wait until they return or ask to meet with someone who is authorized to handle the transactions on their behalf.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is the state's clearinghouse for consumer complaints, protection and information. Consumers who believe fraud has taken place can contact the department's consumer assistance center by calling 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) within Florida, 1-800-FL-AYUDA (352-9832) en Español or visit www.800helpfla.com.

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