

SPOTLIGHT: HOME RENTAL SCAMS

BE ON THE LOOK OUT FOR FAKE RENTAL LISTINGS



Moving to a new city or just need a new place to live ASAP? You find a great place with all the bells and whistles for half the price! This deal is too good to pass up, so you reach out to the owner or landlord. All you have to do is put down a deposit and the house is yours. But, before you know you've been duped, the scammer has your deposit and you never hear from them again.

As you shop around for a new place, be on guard against scammers who list fake places to live. Scammers advertise rentals that either don't exist or aren't available to trick you into sending money and giving over personal information.

Fraudulent rental listings typical happen in two ways:





1 Hijacked Ads

Some scammers hijack a real rental or real estate listing by copying it and placing an edited ad on another site. The edited ad may even use the name of the person who posted the original ad. In other cases, scammers have hijacked the email accounts of property owners or have gained access to lock boxes used to show the property.

2 Phantom Rentals

Other fraudsters make up listings for places that aren't for rent or don't even exist. They try to lure you in with the promise of low rent, immediate availability or great amenities. Their goal is to get your money and/or information before you find out.

RENTAL RED FLAGS

-  **They ask you to wire money.** If someone asks you to pay in an unusual form of payment like wire transfer, gift cards, cryptocurrency, or prepaid debit cards, it's most definitely a scam. There's never a good reason to wire money to pay a security deposit, application fee, first month's rent, or vacation rental fee. These forms of payment are like sending cash — once you send it, you have no way to get it back.
-  **They want a security deposit or first month's rent before you've met, toured the place or signed a lease.** No legitimate rental company or landlord will ask you to pay up front for an apartment or house you haven't seen. You also should not be asked to provide a payment prior to finalizing a lease, aside from an application fee. If you can't visit an apartment or house yourself, ask someone you trust to go for you to verify the listing is legitimate.
-  **You find the listing under different names.** Just like it's important to see the property yourself, it's also important to search it online. If the same ad is listed on multiple sites, verify the details are consistent across listings. If you find the same ad listed under a different name, it may be a scam. You can also reverse image search the listings photos to see if any unusual listings pop-up.
-  **The landlord is "out-of-town" or out of the country.** You want to meet with the landlord to tour the property or finalize the contract to get your keys. The person you've been speaking with suddenly informs you they're unavailable and you can tour the place yourself with a key from under the mat. If you are looking to finalize a contract, they may tell you they will be using someone else to do it and get you the keys. Some scammers will go as far as making a fake key for a property.

HOW TO AVOID RENTAL SCAMS



Talk to the person. Don't just rely on e-mail for communication. Be sure that you talk to the person on the phone. If they are unable or unwilling to do so, it could be a scam.

Be suspicious. Does the owner have a free e-mail service rather than one that indicates an established relationship with a utility company, such as Time Warner or Verizon?

Ask for references. Request that the owner give you references from other tenants. What was their experience with the transaction?

Pay by credit card. Don't pay via wire transfer or bank account transfer. These methods immediately put the money in the scammer's hands and also are difficult to recover. Credit cards offer more protection in the event that the listing is fraudulent.

Background the property. Check online for duplicate listings or negative information related to the listing/owner.

Get it in writing. It is very important to get any verbal promises in writing. Review the contract carefully before forking over any cash.

GENERAL TIPS TO AVOID ID THEFT AND SCAMS

DO THESE THINGS:

- Shred items that include personal information before getting rid of them.
- Before sharing information at the doctor's office, your child's school or a business ask: why they need it, how it will be protected, and what options you have if you don't want to give the information.
- Take those outgoing bills to a USPS blue mailbox.
- Use anti-virus software and update it often.

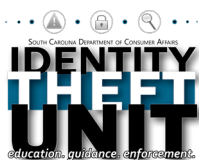


DON'T DO THESE THINGS:

- Never release your personal identifying information (PII) to someone you don't know. That means keep your SSN, date of birth and financial account numbers to yourself!
- Don't use public wi-fi to make purchases or login to your mobile banking site.
- Don't carry around your social security card or birth certificate.
- Don't use your debit card when shopping online.



For more information on protecting yourself from identity theft, visit www.consumer.sc.gov and click Identity Theft Resources.



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