

Disaster Scam Prevention

*Fraud and Scam Prevention Tips
for Oklahoma Consumers*



Office of the Attorney General
Consumer Protection Unit

405-521-2029
918-581-2885

ADVANCE FEE LOAN SCAM

If you need a loan fast, perhaps to rebuild your storm damaged home or business, don't be tempted by promises of "guaranteed" loans for up-front fees ranging from one hundred to several thousand dollars. The Attorney General's Office warns that you may never get a loan or see your money again. It is illegal in Oklahoma to assess an advance fee for a loan. A fee can only be legally assessed after the borrower has received the loan proceeds. Also, be wary of classified ads asking you to call for a "guaranteed" loan.

HOME REPAIR FRAUD

The Attorney General's Office is warning Oklahomans to beware of home repair scams, varieties of which always surface after a major storm. For most people, their home is their largest financial investment and it is important they protect that investment when contracting for home repair services.

Be alert for several clues that might indicate a less than reputable contractor. Be wary of any repair contractor who solicits door-to-door, offers you discounts for finding other customers or "just happens to have" materials left over from a previous job. Also, be suspicious of a repair contractor who accepts only cash payments, pressures you for an immediate decision or asks you to pay for the entire job up-front. The same rules apply when dealing with lawn, landscape, swimming pool or any type of specialty contractors.

Follow these tips:

- Ask people you trust for contractor referrals.
- Whenever possible, deal with local firms with roots in the community.
- Check out the contractor with the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Unit (405-521-2029) or your local Better Business Bureau.
- Ask the contractor for customer references.
- Get written estimates from several firms.
- Don't do business without a written contract.
- Get all guarantees, warranties and promises in writing.
- Agree on start and completion dates and have them written into the contract.
- A small down payment is often necessary, but don't make the final payment until the work is completed to your satisfaction.

IDENTITY THEFT

The loss of personal and financial identification often accompanies major disasters. If your home or business has been damaged, criminals may now have access to documents containing your Social Security Number, or banking and credit card account numbers. They can use this information to access your financial accounts and steal your money.

What To Do If You Have Lost Financial Documents

Contact Your Financial Institutions

Close any accounts that have been compromised and place "Stop Payments" on lost checks. Also, cancel all lost credit/debit cards immediately and have new ones issued. You should carefully examine all bank and credit card statements for unauthorized use.

Contact Credit Bureaus

Ask that your account be "flagged" for possible "unauthorized activity" at your request, and that a "victim's statement" be attached. It is recommended that it read "Account closed at consumer's request," instead of "Card lost or stolen." Normally such an alert will remain on your file for seven years.

TRANSUNION:	1-800-680-7289
EXPERIAN:	1-888-397-3742
EQUIFAX:	1-800-525-6285

Report the Loss or Unauthorized Use of Your Drivers License

Call the Driver's License Fraud Division of the Department of Public Safety at 405-425-2477 and ask that the license be flagged as lost or stolen and have a new license issued. It is a good idea to use a number other than your Social Security Number for your new drivers license.

Report the Loss of Unauthorized Use of Your Social Security Number

Report a lost or stolen Social Security Number to the Social Security Administration's Fraud Hotline at 1-800-269-0271.

What To Do If You Know Someone Has Used Your Identity

Call your Local Police Immediately

Acting quickly is crucial. Report that you are a victim of identity theft and get a copy of the police report and keep it for later use.

TELEMARKETING FRAUD

Fraudulent telemarketing schemes often follow disasters. You can protect yourself by simply guarding against doing business over the telephone, especially with people or organizations you are not familiar with. Never give credit card or checking account numbers over the phone, unless you initiated the phone call. Always ask for details in writing and don't be pressured to send cash or a check by messenger or overnight mail.

PRICE GOUGING

Unfortunately, the incidence of price gouging (the sudden, sometimes dramatic increasing of prices for items in demand) following a natural disaster is well documented. The vast majority of Oklahoma businesses are community minded and deal with their neighbors in a spirit of kindness and generosity. But some businesses, perhaps those whose ownership has no roots in the community, may not be so generous or kind.

In 1999, the Oklahoma Legislature passed the Emergency Price Stabilization Act which makes price gouging following a natural disaster a crime. If you feel you have been the victim of price gouging as the result of a disaster, please call the Attorney General's Office at 405-521-2029 or 918-581-2885.

DOOR-TO-DOOR SOLICITATIONS

As storm damage is cleared, you may find a series of solicitors at your door. Some may be soliciting donations to help in recovery efforts while others may be offering a variety of home-repair services or products.

The Attorney General's Office is warning Oklahomans to beware of these door-to-door solicitations, as many are only looking to separate you from your money.

For peace of mind, donate directly to the charity of your choice and deal only with established, reputable home repair businesses. Often times, the door-to-door solicitors are only in town long enough to make a few fast dollars.