



Utility and Government Shams Rock the Consumer Protection Hotline

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**Media Contact: Jerad Albracht, Communication Specialist
(608) 224-5007, jerad.albracht@wisconsin.gov**

MADISON – On St. Patrick’s Day, everyone hopes the “luck of the Irish” will come their way. But it takes more than luck to keep from being ripped off by imposter scammers. While the callers on the other end may not be leprechauns in green jackets, they are tricksters looking to fool you into helping fill their pot of gold.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) has received a number of recent reports about imposter phone scams, most notably those where the caller claims to be with the local utility or the Social Security Administration (SSA). Wisconsinites should be on the lookout for these fraudsters and hang up immediately if a caller makes threats and demands money or personal information.

“While it’s highly unlikely that a leprechaun will contact you over the St. Patrick’s Day holiday, it’s very likely that an imposter scammer will call,” said Lara Sutherlin, Administrator for the Division of Trade and Consumer Protection. “Remember that government and utility representatives make contact about account issues by mail, not by phone. Whether these callers are pitching threats at you or trying to sell you a load of blarney, hang up immediately.”

The majority of the recent imposter scam reports to DATCP have involved:

- fake utility representatives claiming that they need a payment to keep the power on,
- fake SSA representatives making threats about legal action or the withholding of benefits unless the consumer turns over money or personal information,
- fake Internal Revenue Service (IRS) agents demanding immediate payment for back taxes under the threat of arrest or legal action, or
- fake Medicare representatives insisting that you will face a loss of benefits if you do not provide personal identification information and/or pay a fee. Scammers may also claim to offer free medical devices under the Medicare program.

These sham calls have been a nationwide nuisance for a number of years, and there is real money at risk. Over the past 15 months, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has received more than 63,000 reports of fake SSA calls alone. Three percent of the people who filed those complaints lost money in the scam – more than \$16.6 million in losses has already been reported. Again, that does not even include the losses to fake utility, IRS or Medicare representatives.

One group that is particularly susceptible to imposter scams is international students. The FTC recently warned that they have received many reports from students, particularly from South Asia, who are getting calls from fake government representatives. The callers claim that there are issues with the students’ immigration documents or visa renewals and threaten the students with arrest or deportation if a payment is not made immediately by prepaid gift card (like iTunes or Google Play) or by Bitcoin or another cryptocurrency.

(NOTE: Students concerned about their visa or immigration documentation should call the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Contact Center at 800-375-5283 or check their immigration case status at uscis.gov).

Thankfully, there are many ways to spot imposter scams. Question any urgent, threatening call that supposedly comes from your utility provider or a government agency. If a caller ever demands a payment by prepaid debit card, gift card, or wire transfer, that is a major scam red flag. Also, remember that scammers often manipulate the caller ID information in their calls, so do not trust that the incoming number or business name is correct if you are being threatened or pushed to share information by a caller. Hang up immediately.

For additional information or to file a complaint, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at <https://datcp.wi.gov>, call the Consumer Protection Hotline at 800-422-7128 or send an e-mail to datcph hotline@wi.gov.

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