

NEWS RELEASE

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STENEHJEM: DON'T BE FOOLED BY A CORONAVIRUS SCAM

BISMARCK, ND – Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem reminds North Dakota residents to check the facts to avoid being fooled by a coronavirus-related scam.

“Scam artists are using the current pandemic situation to exploit our fears. We can stop them by getting the facts and using a common sense approach when dealing with those offering what seem to be too-good-to-be-true opportunities,” said Stenehjem.

One scam that has already been reported in North Dakota is a new variation of the old “grandparent” scam call, but this time the scam artist claimed to be a grandchild sick with Coronavirus who needed money urgently for treatment costs. Fortunately, the grandparent recognized the call as a scam and hung up immediately.

Nationally, there are reports of scams relating to the individual payments in the recently passed federal stimulus bill - from phony emails supposedly from the IRS or Social Security Administration requiring the recipient to click on a link to “verify” their personal information to fake calls and robocalls claiming the stimulus check cannot be issued until the person “confirms” their personal information and social security number.

“The stimulus payments will be generated automatically by the federal government. If you filed a tax return for 2018 or 2019, the IRS already has all the information it needs to mail the stimulus check to you or deposit it into your bank account, so don't be fooled by emails, text messages, or calls asking you for that information,” urged Stenehjem. He also warned residents that scam artists may claim they can expedite the stimulus payment for a fee, which is a lie.

Stenehjem said North Dakotans should expect to see these scams filter into the state soon.

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division offered the following information to help avoid these Coronavirus-related scams:

Coronavirus Tests, Vaccines, Cures

Ignore offers for COVID-19 vaccinations and home test kits. The FDA has not authorized any home test kits for COVID-19. Currently, no vaccines, pills, potions, lotions, medications, or other prescription or over-the-counter products are available to prevent, treat, or cure Coronavirus. This applies to offers made online, on TV, in stores, by text message or email, or over the phone. They are all false.

- Claims that a particular product will provide Coronavirus immunity, protection, treatment, or cure, are false. **Report** these phony cures to the National Center for Disaster Fraud Hotline, **toll-free 1-866-720-5721**.

- **No state or federal government agency** requires an individual to complete Coronavirus testing as a condition for applying for or receiving benefits. If you get a call claiming that you will lose a benefit or your stimulus check unless you complete a home test, it is always a scam. Hang up.
- If anyone knocks on your door offering a Coronavirus home testing kit, it's a scam. Do not let them in your house. Lock your door and then call your local law enforcement agency to make a report. We have not had reports of this happening in North Dakota, but other states have.

Cyber Scams

Scam artists create official looking emails in the hope of convincing the recipient they are legitimate.

- Do not *open* emails claiming to be from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), World Health Organization (WHO), and other healthcare organizations, offering to share information about the virus. Scammers are using phony COVID-19 tracking websites to infect electronic devices with malware, putting residents at risk for identity theft and financial exploitation. Simply delete these emails.
- Do not *respond* to any emails asking for verification of personal data, including Medicare or Medicaid information or Social security benefits, in exchange for receiving economic stimulus funds or other benefits from the government. Government agencies are **NOT** sending out emails asking for residents' personal information in order to receive funds or other pandemic relief opportunities.
- Be cautious about responding to social media "get to know you" quizzes. Questions such as "what was your first car?" and "what was your favorite teacher's name?" may seem harmless, but these are the same questions used as security questions when setting up online financial accounts. Scam artists can use the answers to these security questions – in combination with the public information commonly found on social media profiles, such as date of birth, current city, and employer – to create a phony profile and open new credit card accounts using the victim's name.

Phony Charities & Donation Requests

Coming together in a time of need and extreme hardship is testament to "North Dakota Nice;" however, when disasters and life changing events such as the current pandemic occur, be cautious as to where donations are going. Unfortunately, scammers take advantage of good will and generosity by creating fictitious charitable organizations, seeking fraudulent donations by taking money which could otherwise go to those in need. Before you open your wallet, do your research.

- Consider first giving to local organizations you know and trust. Many local charities have seen an increase in the need for services while at the same time, donations have been reduced. Call a local charitable organization directly to see how you can put your money to use in your own community.
- Be wary of social media appeals for donations. Anyone can create an online fundraising appeal, even if they are not associated with any legitimate charity. If you suspect an online fundraising effort is fraudulent, report it immediately to the social media platform on which it appears.

- When giving, always do so by credit card or other secure payment processor. **Never** donate by prepaid card, wire transfer, or other anonymous electronic payment processor.

REMEMBER – Facts not Fear. Fight misinformation and scam artists by always fact-checking, using an official government or other reliable source:

- Scam information: <https://attorneygeneral.nd.gov/consumer-resources/common-scams>
- North Dakota COVID-19 Resources: <https://ndresponse.gov/covid-19-resources>
- Federal Stimulus payment information: <https://www.irs.gov/coronavirus>
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/coronavirus
- Charities registered in North Dakota: <https://firststop.sos.nd.gov/search/charitable>
- Charity Watchdog organizations: www.charitynavigator.org, <http://www.give.org/>, <https://www.charitywatch.org/>.

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