

SPOTLIGHT: REAL ESTATE SCAMS

BE ON THE LOOK OUT FOR FAKE RENTAL LISTINGS



You may be looking to go on a vacation and short-term rentals can be a great alternative to getting a hotel. Or you may be moving to a new city and need a place to live. Either way, a common real estate scam that involves hi-jacking internet realty listings has the SC Department of Consumer Affairs (SCDCA) urging consumers to exercise caution in their search for a place to stay!

The scam goes something like this:

You find a great house with all the bells and whistles for half the price! This deal is too good to pass up, so you e-mail the owner. 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 is headed for a dream vacation of his own!

Here are some tips to avoid the crooks:

- 1 Look up the owner.** You can seek out the real owner and their contact information by looking up the property on the register of deeds website. Be sure you are looking in the county in which the house is located.
- 2 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.
- 3 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?
- 4 Ask for references.** Request that the owner give you references from other tenants. What was their experience with the transaction?
- 5 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.
- 6 Background the property.** Check online for duplicate listings or negative information related to the listing/owner.
- 7 Get it in writing.** It is very important to get any verbal promises in writing. Review the contract carefully before forking over any cash.

LONG-TERM RENTALS

College students and others that are planning to relocate should be cautious, too. Follow the tips above but, also, keep the following in mind:



- Tour the whole property before putting any money down.
- If the owner is truly planning to leave their home in your care, they will probably want to meet and possibly interview a red flag if the person shows no interest in you.
- Scammers may try to gain your confidence by claiming to be out of the country for mission work or stationed over seas.

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



South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs
293 Greystone Blvd., Ste. 400 • PO Box 5757 • Columbia, SC 29250
(800) 922-1594 • www.consumer.sc.gov

