

Hamilton County Coalition to Stop Fraud, Scams & Abuse



Comprehensive Community Plan

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HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Dear Hamilton County Resident,

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about consumer fraud, identity theft and scams.

These frustrating and all too often heartbreaking stories are everywhere. From home repair scams to mortgage relief schemes to Medicare fraud, criminals are utilizing inventive ways to steal from consumers. Fueled by the downturn in the economy, the prevalence of fraud and scams in our community is troubling. Our community's most vulnerable populations are often the target of these crimes and consumer fraud is on the rise – but we can work to change this.

The **Hamilton County Coalition to Stop Fraud, Scams & Abuse** was assembled by Commissioner Greg Hartmann to help prevent and fight against the exploitation of our citizens. The 30-member group includes representatives from the business community, law enforcement, social service agencies and local non-profits who are equipped to use their professional experience combating fraud and scams to reach as many Hamilton County residents as possible. The group quickly resolved that the best way to help County residents fight fraud and scams was to arm them with information: how to *identify* potential fraud or scams, how citizens can *protect* themselves, and how to *report* an instance of fraud should you become a victim.

This *Comprehensive Community Plan* is the foundation of the Coalition's work. Within this plan, we've worked hard to develop an inclusive list of common types fraud and scams that Hamilton County residents may encounter. Each section discusses how you can detect fraud or a scam, how you can guard yourself from becoming a victim, and how you should report the fraud or scam to the proper law enforcement authorities.

In addition to this *Community Plan*, our Coalition will pro-actively educate our residents through outreach activities, presentations and partnerships with other community organizations throughout the year. A coordinated social media campaign and website will also be an integral part of our community education outreach.

An important part of our Coalition's success is feedback from Hamilton County residents like you. To provide suggestions for this Community Plan or ways that our Coalition can best reach out to the community, please contact Kellie Wise at (513) 946-4405 or kellie.wise@hamilton-co.org. You can also visit our Web site at www.hamilton-co.org/fraud.

Sincerely,

The Hamilton County Coalition to Stop Fraud, Scams & Abuse



**HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION
to **STOP**
FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE**



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HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Senior Citizen Fraud & Scams

Common Scams:

- Living Trusts
- Stranger/Investor Originated Life Insurance
- Medicare Scams
- Identity Theft
- Home Improvement Scams
- Charity Scams
- Sweepstakes and Contests
- Grandparent Scams
- Telemarketing Scams
- Credit Repair Scams
- Funeral Arrangement Scams

Senior citizens are often the victims of fraud, identity theft and scams. As a more vulnerable population, seniors can be more trusting than other consumers, have a larger 'nest egg' or other savings, and might also be missing the necessary mental or physical faculties to detect and thwart certain crimes.

Statistics:

According to the MetLife Mature Market Institute, more than 1 million senior citizens lose \$2.6 billion per year on scams or other financial exploitation.

In Medicare alone, healthcare fraud costs taxpayers over \$60 billion dollars a year.

Consumers between 65 and 74 years old were 32% less likely to report fraud than those between 35 and 44 years old. ¹

¹ 2007 Consumer Fraud Survey, Federal Trade Commission, <http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2007/10/fraud.shtm>

Living trusts

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **You are contacted by a lawyer or estate planner who offers a “free” consultation** regarding living trusts. After the consultation, the salesperson charges a high fee to prepare the trust. The salesperson also encourages you to sell your life insurance policy and purchase an annuity but does not tell you about hidden fees and penalties. The salesperson often uses scare tactics and exaggeration about Probate Court and taxes to convince you to buy this trust.
- **You are contacted via phone call or mail to attend a seminar or schedule an in-home appointment** to learn the benefits of a living trust. Once you attend the seminar or appointment, you are pressured to set up a living trust. You may be told that your assets will be tied up indefinitely or that your estate will be prone to heavy taxes or fees if a living trust is not in place. You may also be pressured to purchase a living trust ‘kit’, which costs thousands of dollars.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Do your homework – research living trusts with several reputable professionals and gather information to determine if a living trust is appropriate for your estate. While living trusts are one strategy to plan in advance for the distribution of assets after your death, make sure you shop around to ensure you are getting the best deal with the most trustworthy estate planner or attorney.
- Living trusts are legal arrangements and should be developed with or reviewed by an attorney who specializes in estate planning or elder law.
- Be cautious of “free lunches,” and never invite someone into your home that seems pushy or untrustworthy. Ask a trusted friend or legal advisor to review the trust with you, and be on the look out for surrender fees and tax payments you could face if you transfer your assets.
- Don't fall prey to fear tactics or high-pressure sales pitches. Do not sign anything you do not understand, and take any paperwork or contracts to a trusted lawyer before you sign. Before you purchase any type of ‘kit’, speak with a lawyer to find out exactly what forms and paperwork you need.
- Search the [Ohio Supreme Court Directory](#) to verify if the individual selling trust services has been admitted to practice law in Ohio. While a securities broker or insurance agent may recommend a living trust, only an attorney can create one.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** If you have been pressured into signing a contract or you think your living trust is a scam, contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515) as soon as possible.
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.
- **Pro Seniors:** The Pro Seniors legal hotline (513-345-4160) offers free legal information and advice to Ohio seniors age 60 and over. Consider contacting Pro Seniors before signing any legal documents or making any legal decisions.

Stranger/Investor Originated Life Insurance (STOLI)

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- An investor offers to pay you a fee to purchase life insurance you otherwise would not buy. The investors (strangers) then pay all of the premiums in exchange for being named beneficiary on the policy. When you die, your loved ones receive no benefit. The sooner you die, the more money the investors will make.
- **Stranger/Investor Originated Life Insurance transactions are illegal in Ohio.** STOLI schemes take advantage of legal life settlement transactions where you are paid a lump sum amount – usually greater than you insurance policy's cash surrender value – for a life insurance policy you no longer need.
- Unlike a traditional policy where the insured's loved ones are beneficiaries of the death benefits, in a STOLI arrangement, an investor group (strangers) will likely acquire an interest in the life of a participant

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- A life settlement or STOLI transaction may seem like an easy way to make some extra money, but be wary if you are approached by someone who offers to fund a policy for you.
- Before selling your policy or agreeing to let someone fund one for you, consult a trusted advisor or contact the **Ohio Department of Insurance (1-800-686-1526 or www.insurance.ohio.gov)**.
- Participation in a STOLI transaction – or a life settlement – may affect the participant's ability to purchase additional needed life insurance in the future. Participation may also result in higher premiums for additional coverage and/or tax liabilities.
- If you participate in a STOLI transaction, you could face criminal charges.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Department of Insurance Fraud Hotline:** If someone approaches you and offers you money so they can take out a policy in your name, call 1-800-686-1527.

Medicare fraud

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You suspect that you have been double-billed, overcharged or charged for a medical service or medication never received.
- An individual or company offers some type of free service, such as a power wheel chair or medical testing, but needs your Medicare number and/or social security number to provide the service.
- A salesman comes to your door and tries to sell you a Medicare policy that is accepted by your doctor or hospital.
- You receive a phone call asking for personal information, such as social security numbers, bank account information and Medicare numbers. The caller claims he needs this information to mail your Part D rebate check (\$250 check for Medicare Part D recipients who enter the doughnut hole).

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Don't be afraid to ask questions of your provider or your health insurance – if you think you've been overcharged, you didn't receive a specific service or medication, or you think the service received was unnecessary, speak up.
- The free services in this scam are often a ploy to gain your personal information and Medicare number. Always stay on top of your personal medical records. Review your Medicare Summary Notice and Part D Explanation of Benefits for any mistakes, and keep track of all your medical visits, prescriptions for medications and/or medical services that you receive.
- Research the company offering free services through Better Business Bureau (www.cincinnati.bbb.org) or the Ohio Attorney General's office (www.speakoutohio.gov) to ensure the company is legitimate.
- When selling Medicare products, agents legally cannot sell policies door-to-door or falsely inform you that your doctor or hospital accepts their plan.
- Medicare Part D rebate checks will be mailed automatically. Those who qualify can expect to receive their checks within 45 days of reaching the doughnut hole. Your check will be mailed to the address Social Security has on file for you. Medicare tracks your drug costs for you. Once you reach the coverage gap, you will receive a check. No one will call you and ask for your personal information in order to send you the check.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Medicare Fraud Hotline:** If you think you've been a victim of Medicare Fraud, call 800-447-8477 or TTY 800-377-4950.
- **Senior Medicare Patrol:** Gather all the paperwork and information that proves you are the victim of fraud, and contact your local [Senior Medicare Patrol](http://www.smpresource.org) (www.smpresource.org). Your SMP will be able to report the possible fraud or direct you to the appropriate state or law enforcement to report the possible crime.

Medicare fraud, continued

- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.
- **Ohio Department of Insurance Enforcement Hotline:** Report agents who use negative sales tactics by calling 800-686-1527.

Identity theft

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS IDENTITY THEFT?

- Someone else is using your personally identifying information, such as your name, Social Security Number, bank account information or credit card number, without your permission, to commit fraud or other crimes.
 - o **Mail Fraud:** A number of schemes are often perpetrated by mail. The sender misrepresents his/her identity and delivers forged documents or bogus requests for personal information. Examples include bogus forms which claim to be from taxation authorities or prize clearinghouses; land sales; phony advertising; insurance ripoffs; and fraudulent charitable organizations. Your personal mail delivered to a mailbox is at risk, too. Identity thieves may use your mail to steal your identity or gain more personal information.
 - o **Purse-snatching and pick-pocketing:** Too often, the elderly fall victim to identity theft from the "Good Samaritan", grab-and-run thief and store employee. Wallets and purses provide thieves with PIN numbers, checks, credit cards, driver's licenses and other personal identification.
 - o **Tax Scams:** Scammers make phone calls, send letters or emails claiming to be a legitimate company such as the IRS, or another government entity or financial institution. Seniors are tricked into sharing their account passwords, social security numbers, bank account numbers, and credit card numbers. Seniors are told that a refund is waiting for them but that they need to share their personal and financial information in order to receive it. This is called phishing and is illegal. The IRS does not require taxpayers to complete special forms once the proper tax forms have been submitted.
 - o **Shoulder Surfing:** Someone watches the senior from a nearby location as they punch in their telephone calling card number or credit card number. The criminal also may listen in on conversations as credit card information is relayed over the telephone.
 - o **Online scams:** There are several online ploys to gain your personal information. Thieves may send fraudulent emails from banks or government agencies that request personal information such as bank account numbers or your Social Security number, or that direct you to scam Web sites where you are asked to enter this information.
- Crimes may take several forms, such as obtaining government documents, opening a credit card, renting an apartment, or conducting other financial transactions in your name.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- To reduce the risk of identity theft, mail should be held at the post office when you are traveling and you should place locks on mailboxes for protection.
- Protect your personal and financial information. Shred mail or any other documents that contain sensitive information, and be very cautious about sharing that information with anyone else. Be smart about your activities online – you should very rarely enter any personal information on a Web site unless you're absolutely sure the site is legitimate. Do not use public computers or public wi-fi connections to conduct financial business online.

Identity theft, continued

- Keep your computer system and browser software up to date and set to the highest security level you can tolerate. Use virus scan programs. Be aware of privacy policies for internet sites that you visit and be sure that sites are secure when conducting business online. Don't create obvious passwords and try not to write them down or store them in an insecure location near your computer.
- Limit the amount of information that you carry around in your wallet or purse such as your social security card and credit cards or account numbers that you may not use on a regular basis.
- Monitor your accounts and bank statements regularly and check your credit report on a regular basis to stay on top of irregular charges or financial transactions that you didn't authorize. You can request one free copy of your credit report from each of the 3 credit reporting agencies per year at www.annualcreditreport.com or call 1-877-322-8228.
- Never respond to calls, mail or emails requesting to "verify" your personal information. Your bank, credit card company, online payment system, the IRS or similar organizations will never call, mail or email you requesting your confidential information. They already have it on file.
- If your ID or credit cards are lost or stolen, immediately notify your credit providers and ask each of the credit bureaus to place a "fraud alert" on your file.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC):** If you think you've been the victim of identity theft, file an ID Theft Complaint online (www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov).
- **Local Police Department:** You should immediately contact your local police department to file an Identity Theft Report, as well as provide a copy of your ID Theft Complaint. This detailed Identity Theft Report entitles you to certain legal rights with credit card companies and credit reporting agencies, and may help you recoup some of your losses.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** You may also contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes to include identity theft.
- **Place a fraud alert on your credit reports and review your credit reports carefully.**
 - o The alert tells creditors to follow certain procedures before they open new accounts in your name or make changes to your existing accounts. The three nationwide consumer reporting companies have toll-free numbers for placing an initial 90-day fraud alert; a call to one company is sufficient:

Equifax 1-800-525-6285
Experian 1-888-Experian (397-3742)
TransUnion 1-800-680-7289
 - o Placing a fraud alert entitles you to free copies of your credit reports. Look for inquiries from companies you haven't contacted, accounts you did not open, and debts on your accounts that you can't explain.

Identity theft, continued

- Close accounts that have been tampered with or established fraudulently.
- Call the security or fraud departments of each company where an account was opened or changed without your approval. Follow-up in writing, with copies of supporting documents, including your identity theft report.

Home improvement scams

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **Itinerant worker:** Any time that you need to act immediately to take advantage of a deal such as a home repair contractor arrives at your home and says that he/she has extra supplies from a repair job he/she did for your neighbor's home. If you pay an upfront fee right now, he'll use the extra supplies to repair your home at a discount, and will start work immediately after payment.
- High pressure sales tactics such as reports that repairs need to be made immediately for the safety of you and your family, or in order to take advantage of a special, discount price.
- **Storm chasers:** Fly by night contractors and storm chasers who may drive around your neighborhood in unmarked trucks, do not provide complete contact information for their business and require advance payment. The contractor may tell you that your home has been severely damaged by wind or hail storms and that your insurance company will likely cover the cost. The company may ask that you immediately sign a contract stating that you will hire them to do the job.
- **Chimney Scams:** You call a chimney sweep to clean and inspect your chimney. They inform you that you need a new liner or the whole chimney needs replaced because of cracks. The individual insists that if the chimney is not repaired or replaced, you and your family may succumb to carbon monoxide poisoning or are at risk for a fire. However, they have little to no proof of these claims. Beware of cut-rate prices, particularly by way of coupons. A certified chimney sweep charges \$100-200 for a cleaning and inspection.
- **Termite Scams:** The most common scam to look out for in the pest control business is the exterminator who brings 'evidence' with them, generally termite wings or droppings to show you 'proof' of infestation. Ants with wings to the untrained eye can be mistaken for a termite. Also watch out for any exterminator who claims they will 'control' the termites instead of exterminating them. This means they will only use procedures to limit the size of the colony – not eradicate them.
- **Radon Scams:** Radon is an invisible radioactive gas that is linked to lung cancer. Beware of unlicensed radon 'mitigators,' being sold through high-pressure tactics.
- A contractor offers to seal your driveway for a heavily discounted price. Find out what materials will be used as sealant. Cheaper materials may look good at first, but can wear off in just a couple of months.
- A contractor says he or she has a deal for you that is good only today and unless you agree the offer is not valid.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Do your research when considering interaction with any company or organization. Take advantage of the resources at Better Business Bureau (www.cincinnati.bbb.org), and trade organizations such as your local Homebuilders' Association (www.cincybuilders.com), and the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (www.nari.org) and make sure this business has a history of responsible conduct with consumers.
- Many of these trade associations offer free mediation if the unfortunate situation does arise where there is a dispute between the customer and its contractor members. Additionally, members of these trade groups are held to industry standards created to help resolve disputes in the quality of workmanship.

Home improvement scams, continued

- Ask for references & do your homework. A good contractor should have previous clients who are willing to spread the good word about the contractor's work.
- Get a second and even third opinion from reputable contractors.
- Be wary of any contractors that want to do work 'under the table' or without a contract. Completing a contract and other paperwork helps ensure that you have recourse if the repairs are shoddy or not completed.
- Take time to shop around. Get at least three estimates for the job. Remember that you won't be saving any time or money if you're left with poor quality workmanship or a half-finished job from a contractor you can't track down.
- Never let a contractor proceed with improvements to your home without verifying liability and workman's comp insurance. If you are unable to verify insurance information, it could be a scam.
- Law requires notification in writing of your "Right of Rescission". This grace period allows you to change your mind and declare the contract null and void without penalty if the agreement was solicited at some place other than the contractor's place of business or appropriate trade premises (such as in your home).
- Never make full payment for work upfront. In the City of Cincinnati, contractors may not request more than 10% down under most circumstances. Typically a down payment should be no more than a third of the total cost with additional payments made as the work progresses. Final payment should not be made until work has been completed and you have inspected the work to be sure that you are satisfied.
- If you decide to sign a contract, make sure a completion date is specified and that you know what the job will cost, if work will be subcontracted, if a bond will be posted to protect you against liens on your home, if the contract includes all oral promises made, and if materials to be used are described in detail.
- Carefully review the terms of any financing that may be offered to you to cover the costs of repairs. Is the financing secured, such as a mortgage on your home, or unsecured, like a credit card? You may explore your options in obtaining your own financing through your bank or credit union.
- If you think your home has been damaged in a storm and repairs may fall under your homeowners insurance, contact your insurance company.
- Be cautious about allowing access to your home. If you feel that your safety is at risk, contact the police.
- **Chimney Sweeps:** Look for a certified chimney sweep in your area. If they have concerns, they will use a videoscope or videoscanner to show you the problem and make suggestions about repairs. You should always get a second opinion.
- **Radon Scams:** You can test to determine if radon gas is present in your home; it can seep into your basement, permeate up through your home and become trapped there. Home detection kits are inexpensive, around \$10-20 and can be purchased at local hardware stores.

Home improvement scams, continued

- **Termite Scams:** Always ask the exterminator these questions:
 1. Do you know the difference between ants and termites?
 2. Do you think the infestation is new or old?

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** If you have paid a fee for shoddy or incomplete work, immediately contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (1-800-282-0515 or www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov) to report the crime. Senior citizens – you can also visit <http://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Services/Seniors> for a wealth of information regarding frauds/scams and many more important links, publications and news.
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.
- Call the Trade organization of which the contractor is a member.
- **Local Police Department:** If you have paid a deposit and the company has not returned to start or complete work, you may file a police report for the theft of your money. You should also contact police if you feel threatened or if the individuals canvassing your neighborhood are engaged in suspicious activity.
- **Local Postmaster:** If the US Mail system was used in any way in the scam, call 1-888-877-7644 or go to <https://postalinspectors.uspis.gov/>.
- **"Looks Too Good To Be True" Website:** The website was developed and is maintained by a joint federal law enforcement and industry task force through funding provided by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and the F.B.I. Go to <http://lookstogoodtobetrue.com>,
- **National Chimney Sweep Guild:** If your chimney sweep uses scare tactics, or you suspect fraudulent services were performed on your home, the Guild will provide a state-by-state listing of certified sweeps. <http://www.ncsq.org/>
- **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):** The EPA provides links on it's website to offices where you can get information on safe Radon levels, guidance with radon measurement kits, and a list of licensed companies who can help reduce the radon in your home if it's present. www.epa.gov/iaq/radon/pubs/citguide.html

Charity scam

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **The charity is not properly registered with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as a 501(c)(3) charity, eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions.**
- **The charity employs high pressure fundraising tactics by:**
 - o sending “runners” to pick up contributions from your home,
 - o disguising donation requests as a bill and threatening collection actions for a failure to pay,
 - o suggesting you are legally bound to fulfill a pledge, which you may or may not have committed to make and are under no obligation to fulfill,
 - o employing telemarketers who do not clearly articulate the name of the charity for which it is soliciting or who provide vague responses to questions asked by donors,
 - o implying a larger percent of your contribution will support the charity's programs than is true, or
 - o selling typically inexpensive goods for an inflated price (e.g., a box of garbage bags or light bulbs for a \$50.00 donation).
- **The charity's request is long on emotion, but short on details.**
 - o The charity fails to provide a current address where its services are conducted or refuses to provide a roster of its board of directors, management team, or key employees.
 - o The charity uses vague statements to describe its services (e.g., “we help kids succeed”), and when pressed for details, cannot or refuses to disclose exactly what services they provide.
 - o The charity impatiently responds to requests for more information about its services or finances, pressuring you to give without answering all your questions.

HOW CAN DONORS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- **Give only when you feel confident.** Legitimate charities will accept your donation whenever you are ready. Listen to your instincts; make sure all your questions are answered. Don't give in to pressure about suggested donations. Legitimate charities appreciate donations of any amount, and will not use high-pressure tactics.
- **Be cautious about giving to charities that represent that 100% of your contribution will support programs.** Today's costs of operating a charity make it virtually impossible for a charity to direct 100% of your contribution to program activities.
- **Verify that the charity is properly registered with the IRS** to receive tax-deductible contributions by calling 1-800-829-5500 or visiting www.irs.gov.
- **Check out the charity with BBB (Better Business Bureau)** by calling 513-421-3015 or visiting www.cincinnati.bbb.org.
- **Contact the charity directly** to verify the accuracy of claims made by its fundraiser or telemarketer. Legitimate charities understand that you are contributing your hard-earned money, so they will be willing to assist you by providing as much information as possible about their charity.
- **Be wary of every opportunity** that presents itself – especially when it presents itself in the wake of some big disaster that gets a lot of media attention.

Charity scams, continued

- If you are familiar with a particular organization, **call the charity directly** to ensure a campaign is being conducted and the individual at your door is authorized to collect donations on their behalf. Fraudulent ID cards are a common practice for scammers.
- **Do not give cash.** It is unlikely you will be able to recover these funds if stolen. **Guard your credit card number.** Call the charity directly – get their contact information from the phonebook – to make a contribution using a credit card. Review your billing statement for any suspicious activity, and dispute fraudulent charges with your credit card company as soon as noticed. **Never write a check to an individual.** Checks should only be made payable to the charity.
- The [Charity Rating Guide](#) provides information that will help you in your giving decisions. You can also contact the charity in which you're interested directly to determine if their mission and philosophy match yours.
- At the beginning of each year, decide in advance which charities you'll be supporting, and how much you'll be donating. This will give you time to do your research and will help you gracefully turn down requests for other contributions.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.
- **Attorney General:** call the Attorney General's office in the state in which the charity is located to file a complaint and seek assistance in resolving the dispute.
 - o Ohio: 1-800-282-0515 or www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov.
 - o Kentucky: 1-888-432-9257 or www.ag.ky.gov
 - o Indiana: 1-800-382-5516 or www.in.gov
- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC):** call 1-216-263-3455 to notify the FTC division overseeing charity fraud.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** If you believe you are the victim of an Internet crime, you may contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes.

Sweepstakes and contests

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You receive a letter, postcard, e-mail or telephone call announcing that you've won a prize in a sweepstakes, contest or foreign lottery, even though you don't remember entering or competing. The communication tells you to contact a number or Web site to claim your cash or prize, where you are asked to supply personal information, including your social security number, your bank account information or your credit card information. You may be asked to wire money to pay for taxes or other fees to collect your winnings.
- In some instances, you may be sent a check for the award proceeds along with instructions to cash the check and wire some amount for taxes or other fees.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Do not share personal information with strangers unless you're absolutely sure they are reputable professionals. If you do not remember entering a sweepstakes or contest, be extremely cautious – if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
- Do your research when considering interaction with any company or organization. Take advantage of the resources at Better Business Bureau (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org), and make sure this business has a history of responsible conduct with consumers.
- If you become uncomfortable interacting with any sweepstakes or contest representative on the phone, remember that you can always hang up and call back later. If their sweepstakes giveaway or contest prize is legitimate, it will be there when you call back. Do your research before you call back or supply any personal information. Ask the sweepstakes promoter for the name, address, phone number and other contact information for the sweepstakes promoter.
- Do not wire funds in order to claim a prize. If you need to pay a fee, you did not win anything.
- If you have been presented a check to cash and wire funds back, there's a good chance that the check is counterfeit.
- If you've been told that you've won a foreign lottery and need to pay money for taxes or other fees to claim your prize, take caution. Foreign lotteries are illegal.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** Many sweepstakes and contests result in identity theft. Always monitor your credit card and bank statements, your credit report and any other financial transactions, and immediately contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515) if you think your identity has been stolen.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** If you believe you are the victim of an Internet crime, you may contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes.

Sweepstakes and contests, continued

- **Local Postmaster:** If any part of the scam was perpetrated through the mail, you can file a complaint with the Postal Inspection Service at <https://postalinspectors.uspis.gov/>.
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.

Grandparent scam

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You are contacted by someone posing as your grandchild, a friend of your grandchild or a police officer, who says your grandchild is under arrest or have been detained in a foreign country while on vacation. Your grandchild is quite frightened and in a hurry to be released.
- Your grandchild or their friend tells you that the only way to be released is to pay a local lawyer thousands of dollars, and they ask you to wire that money immediately. They also ask you not to contact your local authorities, or the grandchild's parents, and to wire the money as quickly as possible.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Whenever you are contacted by a person pretending to be a family member in a foreign location or an odd situation, ask the person questions that only a family member would know. When in doubt, hang up the phone and contact another family member to verify the information you've been given.
- Discuss the possibility of this scam occurring in your family, and devise a "password" or code phrase that will be used in the event of emergencies to ensure you're really speaking with a grandchild.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Local Police Department:** If you think you're encountered a grandparent scam, immediately contact your local police department to file a report.
- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** Contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).

Telemarketing scam

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You are contacted by a salesperson via telephone, who offers you prizes, low-cost products, cheap vacations or other discounted deals. The caller may claim to be from a well-known company or organization, but has no proof to verify their affiliation.
- The caller claims that the offer is only good for a short amount of time, and you must act now. You are asked to immediately provide personal information or payment or the offer is void.
- If the caller represents a sweepstakes or contest, they may ask you to pay handling charges, services fees or other costs before you can collect your winnings.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Register with the Do Not Call Registry, 1-888-382-1222 or www.donotcall.gov. This will help reduce the number of telemarketing calls you receive at your home.
- Ask for the caller's name, employer and return phone number. Research the company with the Better Business Bureau (513-421-1025), and contact the company directly through the Yellow Pages to verify the salesperson is one of the company's representatives.
- NEVER give personal information, such as your Social Security Number, bank account information or Medicare number, over the phone unless you initiated the call and can trust the person on the other end of the line.
- Do not buckle to high-pressure sales tactics. Ask for the offer in writing, mailed to your home, and let them know that you will review the information and call them back if you're interested. If the caller won't take "no" for an answer, hang up.
- If the caller says you are a winner of a sweepstakes or contests, request all information about the winnings in writing, mailed to your home.
- Limit your participation in future sweepstakes and contests. Often, the information you provide to participate is sold and gets in the hands of scammers. These scammers can turn out to be the unwanted telemarketers who call your home.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Local Police Department:** If you think you've lost money or your identity to a telemarketing scam, immediately contact your local police department to file a report.
- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** Contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).

Credit repair scam

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You are contacted via telephone, email or mail with an offer to erase your bad credit, lower your interest rates on your mortgage, loans, or credit cards, or consolidate your debts. The individual or company may charge hundreds or thousands of dollars but do little or nothing to repair your credit.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Do not respond to solicitations for credit repair services. No individual or company can modify or erase a poor credit score – with few exceptions, negative information remains on your credit report for seven years. You should contact a reputable, nonprofit credit counseling agency or your creditor directly.
- Research the company with your local Better Business Bureau (513-421-1025).
- Remember that no other individual or company can take steps to lower your interest rates or consolidate your debt that you cannot take yourself. Get educated on your financial situation, and contact your creditors directly to resolve your debts.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Local Police Department:** If you think you've lost money or your identity to a credit repair scammer, immediately contact your local police department to file a report.
- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** Contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).

Funeral Arrangement Scams

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You are visited at your home or contacted via telephone, email or mail by an individual with an offer to help you with pre-paying for your burial and/or arranging your funeral plans at a discounted rate. The offer may include a discounted burial plot, casket or funeral ceremony. The individual may say he or she is from Medicaid, Medicare, a government agency, or another legitimate organization.
- The individual may also say he or she is a financial planner or some other type of expert, and offer to help you set up a pre-paid burial or funeral account in order to spare your family the cost of your funeral.
- These individuals may use pushy sales tactics, ask for your personal information, or continue to contact you until you agree to their offer.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Many seniors may wish to spare their loved ones the burden of planning a funeral. However, it is best not to respond to solicitations for funeral arrangement services or pre-paid burial offers. If you are interested in making these arrangements, work with a trusted family member or friend, and research the costs.
- Visit several funeral homes of your choice to discuss pre-need arrangements. Do not sign anything on your first visit. Insist on taking the information home to compare and discuss prior to signing anything.
- Funeral homes must provide detailed price lists before accepting payment for any arrangements. Make sure to ask for a **written** price list, and share this with a trusted family member or friend to ensure you are dealing with a scrupulous funeral home.
- Carefully read any contracts or written information carefully, or ask a trusted family member or friend to review the contract for you.
- Research the company with your local Better Business Bureau (513-421-3015).
- Do not give in to pushy or high-pressure sales tactics. If you are uncomfortable with the sales approach, close the door, hang up the phone and do not respond to their attempts to contact you. If you continue to feel harassed, contact your local police department.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Local Police Department:** If you think you've lost money or your identity to a funeral arrangement scam, immediately contact your local police department to file a report.
- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** Contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).
- **FBI:** Contact the local FBI office at (513) 421-4310.
- **Ohio Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors:** If you have any complaints about a funeral home, contact the Ohio Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors (www.funeral.ohio.gov):
77 South High Street, 16th Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43215-6108
(614) 466-4252.



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Small Business Scams

Common Scams: Pre-pay Shipping
 Valuation Fraud
 Employee fraud and embezzlement

While individuals may often be the target of fraud and scams, small businesses are a lesser-known victim of many fraudulent crimes. Moreover, small businesses are disproportionately affected by fraud and scams compared to large companies. Unfortunately, small businesses don't always have the internal auditing and controls necessary to detect employee fraud and embezzlement, and also face the same innovative and hard-to-detect external scams.

Statistics:

According to the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE), the typical organization loses 5 percent of its annual revenue to occupational fraud.¹

Nearly one-quarter of the instances of occupational fraud involved losses of at least \$1 million.¹

In 2005, data from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) shows that malicious electronic messages cost businesses approximately \$2 billion.

¹ 2010 Report to the Nations, Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, <http://www.acfe.com/rtn/2010-rtn.asp>

Small business scam – Pre-pay shipping

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **Your business is contacted via phone to order a large, heavy item**, particularly merchandise you don't sell very often. The caller pays for the item with a credit card, which appears to go through, and the caller then asks that you pre-pay to ship the item to a P.O. box at a distant location.

HOW CAN SMALL BUSINESSES PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Don't ship any products to a buyer on a pre-paid basis, no matter how large the order is.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** If you think you've been scammed out of shipping charges, contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800) 282-0515) to report the fraud.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** If you believe you are the victim of an Internet crime, you may contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes.

Small business scam – Valuation fraud

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **Your business is contacted via email or fax and asked if you are interested in selling your business.** The sender offers to help you find buyers for your business, and you are asked to pay thousands of dollars upfront to conduct a business valuation to find out how much your company is worth.

HOW CAN SMALL BUSINESSES PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- It is unwise to respond to solicitations via e-mail or fax; most legitimate companies do not conduct business this way.
- Do your homework – research the company that is offering to help, and speak with other trusted professionals. Check the company out with Better Business Bureau. There are several reputable financial services companies or attorneys that can assist you with business valuation and finding buyers for your company.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** Immediately contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515) to report non-service for upfront fees.
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** If you believe you are the victim of an Internet crime, you may contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes.

Employee fraud & embezzlement

The current economic downturn has created an environment ripe for employee fraud from your small business. While these thefts occur in several different ways depending on the nature of your business, there are steps that you can take to protect your company and engage in smart business practices.

HOW CAN SMALL BUSINESSES PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- **Hiring:** Begin protecting your business by hiring competent, trustworthy individuals with a track record of success in the workplace. Run background checks and research employee history.
- **Internal checks and balances:** Spread out the financial tasks of your business to ensure at least two or more employees are responsible for these duties. This will help eliminate the possibility that one employee can embezzle funds.
- **Audits:** Conduct periodic audits, both scheduled and unscheduled, to take stock of your business' fiscal processes. At least once a year, allow external sources to audit your company.
- **Certified Fraud Analysis:** While financial audits may help take stock of your fiscal processes, you might also consider having a certified fraud expert evaluate your business and identify financial processes that might be vulnerable to employee fraud or theft. These analyses evaluate risks and related controls, and your fraud expert can provide recommendations to enhance controls and lower your risk of employee theft.
- **Anonymous reporting policy:** Employees should be provided an anonymous mechanism to report fraud within the company to increase reporting confidence and limit intimidation by coworkers.
- **Mandatory vacations:** Employee fraud and embezzlement is often discovered when the employee who is stealing is forced to allow another employee to fill in and complete his/her duties. Institute a policy that requires all employees to take an annual vacation for a consecutive week.
- **Drug screening:** Unfortunately, employee fraud and substance abuse sometimes go hand in hand. An addiction may push an employee to commit crimes he/she may not normally commit; periodic drug screenings can help identify these problems and create a safer work environment.
- **Model integrity:** Create a work environment that promotes honesty and integrity. Model an attitude of compliance with rules and policy, and expect the same from your employees.



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Veterans Fraud & Scams

Common Scams: Benefits and pension scams
 Identity theft
 Credit repair scams
 Funeral arrangement scams

The diverse population of over 22 million living veterans in the United States has inspired a variety of schemes which prey upon our service men and women through their shared connection of sacrifice and service to our country. Elderly veterans are particularly susceptible to a number of financial scams, although our younger veterans are also being targeted.

Statistics:

The American Association of Retired People (AARP) reports that veterans increasingly become the target of unscrupulous investment advisors.¹

¹AARP, "Taking Aim At Our Soldiers,"
http://www.aarp.org/money/scams-fraud/info-09-2010/taking_aim_at_old_soldiers.html

Benefits and pension scams

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- As a veteran, you are contacted by an individual who says he/she can help you obtain special benefits, pension funds or investment funds through the government or a financial institution because of your military service. The individual often offers to assist you through the process of obtaining these benefits or funds, and serves as your only point of contact throughout the application process. However, you never see the promised benefits or financial returns of this arrangement.

HOW CAN VETERANS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Protect your personal and financial information. Oftentimes, these scams are ploys to gain your personal information and steal your identity.
- Monitor your accounts and bank statements regularly and check your credit report on a regular basis to stay on top of irregular charges or financial transactions that you didn't authorize. You can request one free copy of your credit report from each of the three credit reporting agencies per year at www.annualcreditreport.com or call 1-877-322-8228.
- Check the legitimacy of any veterans' benefits or financial offers through your local Veteran's Affairs office, especially those offered as government programs.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Department of Veterans' Services (DVS):** If you have been the victim of a scammer and are a veteran, you should contact the Ohio DVS (<http://dvs.ohio.gov/>) at 888-DVS-OHIO.
- **Hamilton County Veteran's Services Commission:** You should also contact the Hamilton County Veterans' Services Commission (<http://www.hamiltoncountyohio.gov/veterans/staff/>) at (513) 946-3300.
- **Local police department:** If you have been the victim of identity theft, immediately contact your local police department to file a report.

Identity theft

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS IDENTITY THEFT?

- Someone else is using your personally identifying information, such as your name, Social Security Number, bank account information or credit card number, without your permission, to commit fraud or other crimes.
 - o **Mail Fraud:** A number of schemes which misrepresent the identity of the sender delivering forged documents or bogus requests for personal info are often perpetrated by mail. Examples include sending bogus forms which claim to be from taxation authorities or prize clearinghouses, land sales, phony advertising practices, insurance ripoffs and fraudulent charitable organizations using mail fraud charges. Mail theft is also a type of identity theft. Mail delivered to a mailbox is at risk. To reduce this risk mail should be held at the post office when someone is traveling and locks could be put on mailboxes for protection.
 - o **Tax Scams:** Scammers make phone calls, send letters or emails claiming to be a legitimate company such as the IRS, or another government entity or financial institution. Veterans are tricked into sharing their account passwords, social security numbers, bank account numbers, and credit card numbers. They tell veterans that they are eligible for a 'special' refund, tax break or other benefit, but they need to share their personal and financial information in order to receive it. This is called phishing and is illegal. The IRS does not require taxpayers to complete special forms once the proper tax forms have been submitted.
- Crimes may take several forms, such as obtaining government documents, opening a credit card, renting an apartment, or conducting other financial transactions in your name.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Protect your personal and financial information. Shred mail or any other documents that contain sensitive information, and be very cautious about sharing that information with anyone else. Be smart about your activities online – you should very rarely enter any personal information on a Web site unless you're absolutely sure the site is legitimate. Do not use public computers or public wi-fi connections to conduct financial business online.
- Keep your computer system and browser software up to date and set to the highest security level you can tolerate. Use virus scan programs. Be aware of privacy policies for internet sites that you visit and be sure that sites are secure when transacting business online. Don't create obvious passwords and try not to write them down or at least store them in a secure location away from your computer.
- Monitor your accounts and bank statements regularly and check your credit report on a regular basis to stay on top of irregular charges or financial transactions that you didn't authorize. You can request 1 free copy of your credit report from each of the 3 credit reporting agencies per year at www.annualcreditreport.com or call 1-877-322-8228.
- Never respond to emails requesting to "verify" your personal information. Your bank, credit card company, online payment system, the IRS or similar organizations will never call or email you requesting your confidential information. They already have it on file.

Identity theft, continued

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC):** If you think you've been the victim of identity theft, file an ID Theft Complaint online (www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov).
- **Local police department:** You should also immediately contact your local police department and file an Identity Theft Report, as well as provide a copy of your ID Theft Complaint. This detailed Identity Theft Report entitles you to certain legal rights with credit card companies and credit reporting agencies, and may help you recoup some of your losses.
- **Place a fraud alert on your credit reports and review your credit reports carefully.**
 - o The alert tells creditors to follow certain procedures before they open new accounts in your name or make changes to your existing accounts. The three nationwide consumer reporting companies have toll-free numbers for placing an initial 90-day fraud alert; a call to one company is sufficient:

Equifax 1-800-525-6285
Experian 1-888-Experian (397-3742)
TransUnion 1-800-680-7289
 - o Placing a fraud alert entitles you to free copies of your credit reports. Look for inquiries from companies you haven't contacted, accounts you did not open, and debts on your accounts that you can't explain
 - o Close accounts that have been tampered with or established fraudulently
 - o Call the security or fraud departments of each company where an account was opened or changed without your okay. Follow-up in writing, with copies of supporting documents

Credit repair scam

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You are contacted via telephone, email or mail with an offer to erase your bad credit, lower your interest rates on your mortgage, loans, or credit cards, or consolidate your debts. The individual or company may charge hundreds or thousands of dollars but do little or nothing to repair your credit.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Do not respond to solicitations for credit repair services. No individual or company can modify or erase a poor credit score – with few exceptions, negative information remains on your credit report for seven years. You should contact a reputable, nonprofit credit counseling agency or your creditor directly.
- Research the company with your local Better Business Bureau (513-421-1025).
- Remember that no other individual or company can take steps to lower your interest rates or consolidate your debt that you cannot take yourself. Get educated on your financial situation, and contact your creditors directly to resolve your debts.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Local Police Department:** If you think you've lost money or your identity to a credit repair scammer, immediately contact your local police department to file a report.
- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** Contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).

Funeral Arrangement Scams

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You are visited at your home or contacted via telephone, email or mail by an individual with an offer to help you with pre-paying for your burial and/or arranging your funeral plans at a discounted rate. The offer may include a discounted burial plot, casket or funeral ceremony. The individual may say he or she is from Medicaid, Medicare, a government agency, or another legitimate organization.
- The individual may also say he or she is a financial planner or some other type of expert, and offer to help you set up a pre-paid burial or funeral account in order to spare your family the cost of your funeral.
- These individuals may use pushy sales tactics, ask for your personal information, or continue to contact you until you agree to their offer.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Many seniors may wish to spare their loved ones the burden of planning a funeral. However, it is best not to respond to solicitations for funeral arrangement services or pre-paid burial offers. If you are interested in making these arrangements, work with a trusted family member or friend, and research the costs.
- Visit several funeral homes of your choice to discuss pre-need arrangements. Do not sign anything on your first visit. Insist on taking the information home to compare and discuss prior to signing anything.
- Funeral homes must provide detailed price lists before accepting payment for any arrangements. Make sure to ask for a **written** price list, and share this with a trusted family member or friend to ensure you are dealing with a scrupulous funeral home.
- Carefully read any contracts or written information carefully, or ask a trusted family member or friend to review the contract for you.
- Research the company with your local Better Business Bureau (513-421-3015).
- Do not give in to pushy or high-pressure sales tactics. If you are uncomfortable with the sales approach, close the door, hang up the phone and do not respond to their attempts to contact you. If you continue to feel harassed, contact your local police department.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Local Police Department:** If you think you've lost money or your identity to a funeral arrangement scam, immediately contact your local police department to file a report.
- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** Contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).
- **FBI:** Contact the local FBI office at (513) 421-4310.
- **Ohio Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors:** If you have any complaints about a funeral home, contact the Ohio Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors (www.funeral.ohio.gov):
77 South High Street, 16th Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43215-6108
(614) 466-4252.



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Identity Theft

Common Scams: Personal Identity Theft
 False Company Representative
 ATM Skimmer Fraud

Identity theft is the most common type of fraud, as reported to the Federal Trade Commission. Identity theft involves criminals stealing personal information in order to commit a multitude of crimes. There are several ways to commit identity theft, such as mail, telephone and online schemes, which makes identity theft that much harder to detect and prevent.

Statistics:

Losses from identity theft totaled \$54 billion in 2009, according to the Javelin Strategy & Research.¹

Thirteen percent of identity theft crimes were committed by someone the victim knew.¹

According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Identity theft is the highest-reported type of fraud.²

¹ Javelin 2010 Identity Theft Report, Javelin Strategy & Research, <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/javelin-study-finds-identity-fraud-reached-new-high-in-2009-but-consumers-are-fighting-back-83987287.html>

² 2007 Consumer Fraud Survey, Federal Trade Commission, <http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2007/10/fraud.shtm>

Identity theft

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS IDENTITY THEFT?

- Someone else is using your personally identifying information, such as your name, Social Security Number, bank account information or credit card number, without your permission, to commit fraud or other crimes.
 - o **Mail Fraud:** A number of schemes are often perpetrated by mail. The sender misrepresents his/her identity and delivers forged documents or bogus requests for personal information. Examples include bogus forms which claim to be from taxation authorities or prize clearinghouses; land sales; phony advertising; insurance ripoffs; and fraudulent charitable organizations. Your personal mail delivered to a mailbox is at risk, too. Identity thieves may use your mail to steal your identity or gain more personal information.
 - o **Tax Scams:** Scammers make phone calls, send letters or emails claiming to be a legitimate company such as the IRS, or another government entity or financial institution. You are tricked into sharing their account passwords, social security numbers, bank account numbers, and credit card numbers. You may be told that a refund is waiting for you, but that you first need to share your personal and financial information. This is called phishing and is illegal. The IRS does not require taxpayers to complete special forms once the proper tax forms have been submitted.
 - o **Shoulder Surfing:** Someone watches you from a nearby location as you punch in your telephone calling card number or credit card number. The criminal also may listen in on conversations as credit card information is relayed over the telephone.
 - o **Online scams:** There are several online ploys to gain your personal information. Thieves may send fraudulent emails from banks or government agencies that request personal information such as bank account numbers or your Social Security number, or that direct you to scam Web sites where you are asked to enter this information.
- Crimes may take several forms, such as obtaining government documents, opening a credit card, renting an apartment, or conducting other financial transactions in your name.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- To reduce the risk of identity theft, mail should be held at the post office when you are traveling and you should place locks on mailboxes for protection.
- Protect your personal and financial information. Shred mail or any other documents that contain sensitive information, and be very cautious about sharing that information with anyone else. Be smart about your activities online – you should very rarely enter any personal information on a Web site unless you're absolutely sure the site is legitimate. Do not use public computers or public wi-fi connections to conduct financial business online.
- Keep your computer system and browser software up to date and set to the highest security level you can tolerate. Use virus scan programs. Be aware of privacy policies for internet sites that you visit and be sure that sites are secure when conducting business online. Don't create obvious passwords and try not to write them down or store them in an insecure location near your computer.

Identity theft, continued

- Limit the amount of information that you carry around in your wallet or purse such as your social security card and credit cards or account numbers that you may not use on a regular basis.
- Monitor your accounts and bank statements regularly and check your credit report on a regular basis to stay on top of irregular charges or financial transactions that you didn't authorize. You can request one free copy of your credit report from each of the 3 credit reporting agencies per year at www.annualcreditreport.com or call 1-877-322-8228.
- Never respond to calls, mail or emails requesting to "verify" your personal information. Your bank, credit card company, online payment system, the IRS or similar organizations will never call, mail or email you requesting your confidential information. They already have it on file.
- If your ID or credit cards are lost or stolen, immediately notify your credit providers and ask each of the credit bureaus to place a "fraud alert" on your file.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC):** If you think you've been the victim of identity theft, file an ID Theft Complaint online (www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov).
- **Local Police Department:** You should immediately contact your local police department to file an Identity Theft Report, as well as provide a copy of your ID Theft Complaint. This detailed Identity Theft Report entitles you to certain legal rights with credit card companies and credit reporting agencies, and may help you recoup some of your losses.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** You may also contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes to include identity theft.
- **Place a fraud alert on your credit reports and review your credit reports carefully.**
 - o The alert tells creditors to follow certain procedures before they open new accounts in your name or make changes to your existing accounts. The three nationwide consumer reporting companies have toll-free numbers for placing an initial 90-day fraud alert; a call to one company is sufficient:

Equifax 1-800-525-6285
Experian 1-888-Experian (397-3742)
TransUnion 1-800-680-7289
 - o Placing a fraud alert entitles you to free copies of your credit reports. Look for inquiries from companies you haven't contacted, accounts you did not open, and debts on your accounts that you can't explain.
 - o Close accounts that have been tampered with or established fraudulently.
 - o Call the security or fraud departments of each company where an account was opened or changed without your approval. Follow-up in writing, with copies of supporting documents, including your identity theft report.

Identity theft – False company representative

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You receive a phone call or an in-person visitor claiming to be an employee of a utilities company. **The 'employee' offers to discount your bill** with the company or some other related service for an upfront fee.
- You receive a visitor who claims to be an employee of a utility company or member of law enforcement. **The visitor asks to come inside to perform some type of task**, and you notice things missing after his/her departure.
- You receive a telephone call or a visit at your home from a person who claims to be a utility employee (such as Duke Energy, Greater Cincinnati Water Works or Metropolitan Sewer District) and need to **make an appointment to check or read your meter**. The 'employee' behaves as though he/she is in a hurry and annoyed that you are asking verifying questions prior to allowing access to the home.
- **You find a fraudulent utility charge made to your credit card.**
- You receive a visitor in person or telephone call of a water softener company claiming they have heard from the local utility that you have hard water and **you may need to purchase a water softener system**.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- No reputable employee would offer to pay or discount your bill for a fee. Be extremely cautious and do not hand over any money until you verify with the company that they are actually an employee and are authorized to perform the service they are offering.
- Do not share personal information with strangers unless you're absolutely sure they can be trusted. A door-to-door visitor is often attempting to steal material items or personal information. Do not open the door for anyone without verifying that they are, in fact, an employee or a member of law enforcement.
- Do not allow anyone into the home. To verify that the person is a Greater Cincinnati Water Works (GCWW) employee or contractor, call 513-591-7700 (24 hour number). To verify that the person is a Metropolitan Sewer District (MSD) employee or contractor, call 513-352-4900 (24 hour number).
- Always ask for employment verification (proper photo identification) prior to allowing them into the home. All GCWW employees will wear a uniform with patches on their hats and sleeves that read "Cincinnati Water Works" and have photo identification. All MSD employees will wear a uniform with patches on their hats and sleeves that clearly identify them as MSD employees. Contractors will also have photo identification.
- The employee or contractor will not be in a hurry and will allow time for verification from the utility office that they claim to work for.
- Generally the utility will not send an employee to gain access into the home without prior notice. It is common for the utility to send a letter or hang a tag on the door notifying the occupant of the need to gain access to the home.

False company representative continued

- The utilities are generally working outside and will not make unannounced or unscheduled site visits to the homes. Access to turn off the water can be gained from the valve located at the curb.
- Closely guard your credit card and review charges monthly to avoid possible fraud.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Local Utility Office:** If you think you've handed over money to an imposter or allowed access to your home, immediately call the company they falsely represented.
 - o Duke Energy, 1-800-777-9898
 - o Greater Cincinnati Water Works, 513-591-7700
 - o Metropolitan Sewer District, 513-352-4900
- **Local Police Department:** Immediately contact your local police department to file a report, which will also help you to dispute any fraudulent charges to your credit cards or bank accounts.
- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** If you think you've handed over money to a fake employee, you should contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515) to report the theft.
- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC):** Monitor your credit card and bank statements, your credit report and any other financial transactions, and immediately contact the FTC (1-877-IDTHEFT) if you think your identity has been stolen.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** You may also contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes to include identity theft.

ATM Skimmer fraud

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS FRAUD?

- You attempt to use an ATM, but one of the following occurs:
 - o The ATM has exposed wires, a loose scanner, multiple scanning devices or a sticker that says 'Scan here first'; and/or
 - o Someone else, perhaps another 'customer', a 'bank employee' or a 'machine technician', offers to help you with your transaction.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Do not use an ATM if you spot any exposed wires or other apparent machine defects.
- Protect your ATM card and pin number from strangers. Cover the keys with one hand in case someone is looking over your shoulder or there is a hidden camera nearby.
- Use only ATM machines that are familiar to you, and only those owned by your financial institution. This will help you recognize and avoid any tampering.
- Always monitor your bank statements and ATM balance, and be on guard for irregular transactions that may indicate theft.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC):** If you think you've been the victim of identity theft, file an ID Theft Complaint online (www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov).
- **Local Police Department:** You should also immediately contact your local police department to file an Identity Theft Report, as well as provide a copy of your ID Theft Complaint. This detailed Identity Theft Report entitles you to certain legal rights with credit card companies and credit reporting agencies, and may help you recoup some of your losses.
- **Place a fraud alert on your credit reports and review your credit reports carefully.**
 - o The alert tells creditors to follow certain procedures before they open new accounts in your name or make changes to your existing accounts. The three nationwide consumer reporting companies have toll-free numbers for placing an initial 90-day fraud alert; a call to one company is sufficient:

Equifax 1-800-525-6285
Experian 1-888-Experian (397-3742)
TransUnion 1-800-680-7289
 - o Placing a fraud alert entitles you to free copies of your credit reports. Look for inquiries from companies you haven't contacted, accounts you did not open, and debts on your accounts that you can't explain
 - o Close accounts that have been tampered with



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Job Opportunity & Job Placement Scams

In the current economic downturn, many are looking for employment opportunities. Job opportunity and job placement scams, such as “work-at-home” or “shipping” scams, are more prevalent than ever as consumers look for ways to make more money to support their family.

Statistics:

According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), ‘work-at-home’ programs, in which the purchaser earned less than half of the income the seller promised, found an estimated 2.4 million victims. Many consumers purchased more than one fraudulent ‘work-at-home’ program.¹

¹ 2007 Consumer Fraud Survey, Federal Trade Commission, <http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2007/10/fraud.shtm>

Job opportunity/placement scam

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **Work-at-home:** A company offers to train you in a specific field, often to work-at-home or through the Internet, for a fee. They may also charge you a fee for the start-up supplies or materials. All of these fees are paid to the company before you realize any income from the training or business venture.
- **Phishing:** A company offers you a position, often by email, and asks that you complete a form for a background check including personal information such as your social security number, credit or banking information.
- **Mystery shopper:** You are approached for an opportunity as a mystery shopper. All you need to do is cash a check, usually at a big-box retail store, make a purchase and wire the remainder of the money.
- **Counterfeit check/wire fraud:** You are offered a position to work for a foreign company from home. Your job is to receive checks, cash them and wire the money to your "employer" after keeping a small sum as payment for yourself.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- A real job opportunity will not require up-front fees, unless you are attending a reputable school for education or training. Be wary of any offer that requires a start-up kit, access to a 'hidden' market for a fee or little work for supposedly large profits.
- Exercise caution when providing personal information for any potential employer. Reputable employers do not request information such as your social security number until a job offer is extended or you have started employment.
- Never agree to cash a check and wire money to an unknown person or company. Counterfeit check fraud is very common. Once you have wired funds, your chances of getting any money back are slim. You also risk bank fees for depositing a bad check.
- Verify with Better Business Bureau (www.cincinnati.bbb.org) or the Federal Trade Commission (www.ftc.gov) that the company offering the opportunity is reputable and in good business standing before turning over any money or personal information.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** If you think you've been cheated out of money in a job opportunity scam, contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** If you believe you are the victim of an Internet crime, you may contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes.



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Student Scams

Common Scams:

- Student Identity Theft
- Spring Break Scams
- Job Opportunity and Job Placement Scams
- Credit Repair Scams

High-school students and students in college or post-secondary education are particularly vulnerable to fraud and scams because of their limited life experience and their growing independence from parents or guardians. Younger consumers are also vulnerable to a growing number of identity theft schemes because of the large amount of time they spend on the internet.

Statistics:

According to Javelin Strategy & Research, 'millennials', or those consumers between the ages of 18 and 24 years, take nearly twice as many days to detect fraud, compared to other age groups.¹

According to the Federal Trade Commission, younger consumers, those who did not complete college, and those with high levels of debt were more likely to be victims of fraud.²

According to the Federal Trade Commission, Ohio consumers filed 6,712 complaints regarding 'Travel, Vacations, and Timeshare' in 2006.³

¹ Javelin 2010 Identity Theft Report, Javelin Strategy & Research, <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/javelin-study-finds-identity-fraud-reached-new-high-in-2009-but-consumers-are-fighting-back-83987287.html>

² 2007 Consumer Fraud Survey, Federal Trade Commission, <http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2007/10/fraud.shtm>

³ 2007 Consumer Fraud & Identity Theft Complaint Data, Federal Trade Commission, <http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2007/02/topcomplaints/PDF%20State%20Releases/tc2007Ohio.pdf>

Student scam – Identity theft

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **Online scholarships or loans:** There are several online scholarships or loans, which may not be overtly fraudulent. However, the applications for these scholarships or loans often involve personal questions that give scammers all the information necessary to steal your identity, or to sell the information to spammers or marketers. Often, you don't 'win' the scholarship because it's rarely granted to any applicant, or the amount is so small that it does not offset the cost of identity theft or the spamming. This can also be applied to loan applications.
- **Social networking sites:** You have several online profiles on social networking sites, which ask you to fill out personal information about your family, your friends, your school and your activities. Scammers can steal your identity by looking at your 'profile' and using that information to eventually gain access to your identity.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Make sure to research any organization offering scholarships or loans – ask for references, get a local telephone listing, and ask for lists of scholarships or loans they've awarded, and how often.
- Limit the amount of personal information on your social networking profiles. Guard your interaction online to only those people you personally know and can trust.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC):** Contact the FTC (1-202-FTC-HELP) to report a scholarship or loan scam.
- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** If you've been the victim of identity theft via the Internet, you should contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** You may also contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes to include identity theft.

Student scam – Spring break

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You receive an e-mail, a postcard or a fax advertising a 'free vacation' or incredibly cheap flights for a spring break getaway. Once you respond to the offer, you receive a high-pressure phone call that asks for personal information or a credit card number to continue. Once you go on the trip, you realize you must pay hidden fees, your lodging is sub-standard, and your trip costs much more than you originally believed.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Verify that the company is accredited with a national trade association that offers a consumer protection plan, and research the company through Better Business Bureau.
- Never give personal or credit card information over the phone, and do not be afraid to hang up if the caller is too forceful.
- Request all details of the trip in writing, including the exact and final costs, restrictions, cancellation penalties, and the exact names of hotels and airlines. Ask the tour operator for the names and contact information for previous customers to verify they had a positive experience with the company.
- Independently confirm all travel arrangements with the airlines, cruise line, hotel, etc. before you leave home.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** If you've believe you've been misled about how much your trip would cost or you've been fraudulently charged by the trip company, you should contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.

Job opportunity/placement scam

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **Work-at-home:** A company offers to train you in a specific field, often to work-at-home or through the Internet, for a fee. They may also charge you a fee for the start-up supplies or materials. All of these fees are paid to the company before you realize any income from the training or business venture.
- **Phishing:** A company offers you a position, often by email, and asks that you complete a form for a background check including personal information such as your social security number, credit or banking information.
- **Mystery shopper:** You are approached for an opportunity as a mystery shopper. All you need to do is cash a check, usually at a big-box retail store, make a purchase and wire the remainder of the money.
- **Counterfeit check/wire fraud:** You are offered a position to work for a foreign company from home. Your job is to receive checks, cash them and wire the money to your "employer" after keeping a small sum as payment for yourself.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- A real job opportunity will not require up-front fees, unless you are attending a reputable school for education or training. Be wary of any offer that requires a start-up kit, access to a 'hidden' market for a fee or little work for supposedly large profits.
- Exercise caution when providing personal information for any potential employer. Reputable employers do not request information such as your social security number until a job offer is extended or you have started employment.
- Never agree to cash a check and wire money to an unknown person or company. Counterfeit check fraud is very common. Once you have wired funds, your chances of getting any money back are slim. You also risk bank fees for depositing a bad check.
- Verify with Better Business Bureau (www.cincinnati.bbb.org) or the Federal Trade Commission (www.ftc.gov) that the company offering the opportunity is reputable and in good business standing before turning over any money or personal information.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** If you think you've been cheated out of money in a job opportunity scam, contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** If you believe you are the victim of an Internet crime, you may contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes.

Credit repair scam

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You are contacted via telephone, email or mail with an offer to erase your bad credit, lower your interest rates on your mortgage, loans, or credit cards, or consolidate your debts. The individual or company may charge hundreds or thousands of dollars but do little or nothing to repair your credit.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Do not respond to solicitations for credit repair services. No individual or company can modify or erase a poor credit score – with few exceptions, negative information remains on your credit report for seven years. You should contact a reputable, nonprofit credit counseling agency or your creditor directly.
- Research the company with your local Better Business Bureau (513-421-1025).
- Remember that no other individual or company can take steps to lower your interest rates or consolidate your debt that you cannot take yourself. Get educated on your financial situation, and contact your creditors directly to resolve your debts.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Local Police Department:** If you think you've lost money or your identity to a credit repair scammer, immediately contact your local police department to file a report.
- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** Contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Homeowner and Rental Fraud & Scams

Common Scams: Foreclosure Prevention Assistance Scam
 Mortgage Fraud
 Home Improvement Scam
 Rental Fraud

The housing crisis and subsequent economic downturn has created an environment ripe for fraud and scams against struggling homeowners. Homeowners facing foreclosure or looking to secure a difficult mortgage often fall victim to criminals who may cost them thousands of dollars, their homes or even jail time.

Statistics:

On average, consumers lose approximately \$3,000 to foreclosure prevention scams.

According to PreventLoanScams.org, in October 2010 alone, homeowners reported losing over \$19 million to loan modification scams.¹

¹ *National Loan Modification Scam Database Report, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law,*
<http://www.preventloanscams.org/tools/assets/files/October-LMSPN-Report-Final.pdf>

Foreclosure prevention assistance scam

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **An individual says that, for a fee, he/she can somehow save your home from foreclosure,** perhaps by working with your lender or with a government official. Sometimes this individual represents a company that 'specializes' in foreclosure rescue.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Consumers should first contact a HUD certified counseling agency. Their services are free and they can help you navigate your lender process. See www.hud.gov for a list of certified agencies.
- Call your lender directly and learn as much about your situation as you can. Communicate openly with your lender about your home's foreclosure, and work towards a solution with the assistance from your certified counselor.
- Do not share personal information with strangers unless you're absolutely certain they are certified in foreclosure law or a related field, and are a reputable professional. Conversations about your loan should be held with certified counseling agency or an agency licensed under the federal SAFE ACT. Check www.stateregulatoryregistry.org/NMLS for licensed broker listings.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and Ohio Attorney General's office:** If your foreclosure specialist has accepted a fee without assisting you, immediately contact the FTC (1-877-FTC-HELP) as well as the Ohio Attorney General's office (800) 282-0515). You should also submit a complaint to Better Business Bureau to stop the company from continuing its fraudulent claims.
- **Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI):** You should also contact the FBI's Cincinnati office (513-421-4310) to report any mortgage fraud information that could be investigated by the Cincinnati Metropolitan Area Mortgage Fraud Task Force, which is comprised of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, to include the Cincinnati Police Department and the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office.
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.

Mortgage fraud

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **Without your solicitation, an individual offers to assist you in obtaining a mortgage for a home or property.** As your representative, he/she completes a majority of your paperwork for you and insists that you work with only certain appraisers or financial experts. This representative may also request to borrow an amount larger than the cost of the property.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Consumers should first contact a HUD certified counseling agency. Their services are free and they can help you navigate your lender process. See www.hud.gov for a list of certified agencies.
- Be sure to check the credentials of anyone who purports to be a 'mortgage specialist'. Investigate the company, if applicable, through Better Business Bureau (www.cincinnati.bbb.org) and trust your instincts.
- Get involved in your mortgage proceedings. While the process may be confusing, it is important that you to stay informed of and attentive to every aspect of a borrowing process involving *your* money. Conversations about your loan should be held with certified counseling agency or an agency licensed under the federal SAFE ACT. Check www.stateregulatoryregistry.org/NMLS for licensed broker listings.
- Do your research and seek recommendations from trusted friends and colleagues whenever possible.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Your bank or mortgage lender:** Mortgage fraud is not a crime against only you; this type of fraud also scams banks and lenders out of money because the fraudulent loan amount is often too much for borrowers to pay back, and the loan goes into default. You are left with financial ruins, and the lender is never paid back the loan. If you suspect your mortgage is being fraudulently administered, immediately contact the bank or lender and begin sorting out the information that is being processed.
- **Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI):** You should also contact the FBI's Cincinnati office (513-421-4310) to report any mortgage fraud information that could be investigated by the Cincinnati Metropolitan Area Mortgage Fraud Task Force, which is comprised of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, to include the Cincinnati Police Department and the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office.

Home improvement scam

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **Itinerant worker:** Any time that you need to act immediately to take advantage of a deal such as a home repair contractor arrives at your home and says that he/she has extra supplies from a repair job he/she did for your neighbor's home. If you pay an upfront fee right now, he'll use the extra supplies to repair your home at a discount, and will start work immediately after payment.
- High pressure sales tactics such as reports that repairs need to be made immediately for the safety of you and your family, or in order to take advantage of a special, discount price.
- **Storm chasers:** Fly by night contractors and storm chasers who may drive around your neighborhood in unmarked trucks, do not provide complete contact information for their business and require advance payment. The contractor may tell you that your home has been severely damaged by wind or hail storms and that your insurance company will likely cover the cost. The company may ask that you immediately sign a contract stating that you will hire them to do the job.
- **Chimney Scams:** You call a chimney sweep to clean and inspect your chimney. They inform you that you need a new liner or the whole chimney needs replaced because of cracks. The individual insists that if the chimney is not repaired or replaced, you and your family may succumb to carbon monoxide poisoning or are at risk for a fire. However, they have little to no proof of these claims. Beware of cut-rate prices, particularly by way of coupons. A certified chimney sweep charges \$100-200 for a cleaning and inspection.
- **Termite Scams:** The most common scam to look out for in the pest control business is the exterminator who brings 'evidence' with them, generally termite wings or droppings to show you 'proof' of infestation. Ants with wings to the untrained eye can be mistaken for a termite. Also watch out for any exterminator who claims they will 'control' the termites instead of exterminating them. This means they will only use procedures to limit the size of the colony – not eradicate them.
- **Radon Scams:** Radon is an invisible radioactive gas that is linked to lung cancer. Beware of unlicensed radon 'mitigators,' being sold through high-pressure tactics.
- A contractor offers to seal your driveway for a heavily discounted price. Find out what materials will be used as sealant. Cheaper materials may look good at first, but can wear off in just a couple of months.
- A contractor says he or she has a deal for you that is good only today and unless you agree the offer is not valid.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Do your research when considering interaction with any company or organization. Take advantage of the resources at Better Business Bureau (www.cincinnati.bbb.org), and trade organizations such as your local Homebuilders' Association (www.cincybuilders.com), and the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (www.nari.org) and make sure this business has a history of responsible conduct with consumers.
- Many of these trade associations offer free mediation if the unfortunate situation does arise where there is a dispute between the customer and its contractor members. Additionally, members of these trade groups are held to industry standards created to help resolve disputes in the quality of workmanship.

Home improvement scam, continued

- Ask for references & do your homework. A good contractor should have previous clients who are willing to spread the good word about the contractor's work.
- Get a second and even third opinion from reputable contractors.
- Be wary of any contractors that want to do work 'under the table' or without a contract. Completing a contract and other paperwork helps ensure that you have recourse if the repairs are shoddy or not completed.
- Take time to shop around. Get at least three estimates for the job. Remember that you won't be saving any time or money if you're left with poor quality workmanship or a half-finished job from a contractor you can't track down.
- Never let a contractor proceed with improvements to your home without verifying liability and workman's comp insurance. If you are unable to verify insurance information, it could be a scam.
- Law requires notification in writing of your "Right of Rescission". This grace period allows you to change your mind and declare the contract null and void without penalty if the agreement was solicited at some place other than the contractor's place of business or appropriate trade premises (such as in your home).
- Never make full payment for work upfront. In the City of Cincinnati, contractors may not request more than 10% down under most circumstances. Typically a down payment should be no more than a third of the total cost with additional payments made as the work progresses. Final payment should not be made until work has been completed and you have inspected the work to be sure that you are satisfied.
- If you decide to sign a contract, make sure a completion date is specified and that you know what the job will cost, if work will be subcontracted, if a bond will be posted to protect you against liens on your home, if the contract includes all oral promises made, and if materials to be used are described in detail.
- Carefully review the terms of any financing that may be offered to you to cover the costs of repairs. Is the financing secured, such as a mortgage on your home, or unsecured, like a credit card? You may explore your options in obtaining your own financing through your bank or credit union.
- If you think your home has been damaged in a storm and repairs may fall under your homeowners insurance, contact your insurance company.
- Be cautious about allowing access to your home. If you feel that your safety is at risk, contact the police.
- **Chimney Sweeps:** Look for a certified chimney sweep in your area. If they have concerns, they will use a videoscope or videoscanner to show you the problem and make suggestions about repairs. You should always get a second opinion.
- **Radon Scams:** You can test to determine if radon gas is present in your home; it can seep into your basement, permeate up through your home and become trapped there. Home detection kits are inexpensive, around \$10-20 and can be purchased at local hardware stores.

Home improvement scam, continued

- **Termite Scams:** Always ask the exterminator these questions:

1. Do you know the difference between ants and termites?
2. Do you think the infestation is new or old?

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** If you have paid a fee for shoddy or incomplete work, immediately contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (1-800-282-0515 or www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov) to report the crime. Senior citizens – you can also visit <http://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Services/Seniors> for a wealth of information regarding frauds/scams and many more important links, publications and news.
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.
- Call the Trade organization of which the contractor is a member.
- **Local Police Department:** If you have paid a deposit and the company has not returned to start or complete work, you may file a police report for the theft of your money. You should also contact police if you feel threatened or if the individuals canvassing your neighborhood are engaged in suspicious activity.
- **Local Postmaster:** If the US Mail system was used in any way in the scam, call 1-888-877-7644 or go to <https://postalinspectors.uspis.gov/>.
- **"Looks Too Good To Be True" Website:** The website was developed and is maintained by a joint federal law enforcement and industry task force through funding provided by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and the F.B.I. Go to <http://lookstogoodtobetrue.com>,
- **National Chimney Sweep Guild:** If your chimney sweep uses scare tactics, or you suspect fraudulent services were performed on your home, the Guild will provide a state-by-state listing of certified sweeps. <http://www.ncsq.org/>
- **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):** The EPA provides links on it's website to offices where you can get information on safe Radon levels, guidance with radon measurement kits, and a list of licensed companies who can help reduce the radon in your home if it's present. www.epa.gov/iaq/radon/pubs/citguide.html

Rental fraud

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS FRAUD?

- *As a renter:*
 - o You are moving to a new city, and agree to rent an apartment or house without physically visiting the building yet. The landlord demands a security deposit and first month's rent, but you are unable to contact the landlord after you send along these payments.
 - o You move into a new apartment or house, and soon receive an eviction notice because the building or home is in foreclosure.

- *As a landlord:*
 - o You rent an apartment or house to a tenant without conducting a background check. The tenant is consistently late on the rent and causes excessive damage to the unit when he/she moves out. However, you are unable to reach the tenant to recoup the damages to the apartment or other delinquent payments.

HOW CAN RENTERS AND LANDLORDS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- *As a renter:*
 - o Do not pay a security deposit or any rent until you've walked through the unit in person.
 - o Research the neighborhood or area that you plan to live in and find out how much apartments usually cost. Resist the temptation to hastily agree to an apartment or house that seems too good to be true – it probably is.
 - o Do not provide any personal information, which might be requested on a rental application, until you're sure that the apartment and the landlord are legitimate.

- *As a landlord:*
 - o Conduct thorough background and credit checks on possible tenants. This will help avoid renting to past criminals or those with unstable financial history. These checks will also help to verify to identity of the tenant, which can also be fraudulent.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Local police department:** Report all stolen money immediately to your local police department. You should also report any fraudulent documents or information from potential tenants.



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

Common Scams: Drug Theft
 Misappropriation of funds

As a vulnerable population, individuals with developmental disabilities can become the victim of fraud or scams in their own homes, either through the theft of their medication or misappropriation of their finances. Many times, the perpetrators of these crimes are individuals that have become close to the victims and participate in their day-to-day activities.

Statistics:

According to the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities (ODODD), there were 80 reported cases of misappropriation of medications involving individuals with developmental disabilities from January 2010 – November 2010.

The ODODD received 1399 reports of misappropriation and exploitation of various resources involving individuals with developmental disabilities from January 2010 – November 2010.

Drug theft

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS THEFT?

- As a caregiver, family member or trusted friend, you notice that **medication prescribed to an individual with developmental disabilities is missing or in unusual amounts from day to day**. The individual may seem to have unusual pain or discomfort, or his/her behavior may seem erratic or out of the ordinary.

HOW CAN YOU PROTECT INDIVIDUALS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES?

- Place all medication in a locked, safe storage facility with access limited to only necessary caregivers. Track who is dispensing medications with accountability, and conduct a regular inventory of medications to make sure that only the medications necessary are being dispensed.
- Monitor the behavior of the individual. If you notice unusual moods or behavior, immediately take the individual to a doctor to uncover the reasons.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **241-KIDS**: If the individual is under the age of 20, call the Hamilton County Job and Family Services' 24-hour hotline to report child abuse or neglect.
- **Hamilton County Developmental Disabilities Services' (HCDDS) Major Unusual Incidents and Prevention Unit (MUIP)**: MUIP is a mandated investigative and prevention entity within HCDDS. To report an emergency, call 513-794-3308. To speak with the MUIP Unit help desk, call 513-559-6536.
- **Local Police Department**: If you suspect that someone is stealing medication from an individual with developmental disabilities, immediately contact your local police department to file a report.

Misappropriation of funds

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS THEFT?

- As a caregiver, family member or trusted friend, you notice that the **funds appropriated for living expenses for an individual with developmental disabilities are missing**. The individual can no longer afford necessities, such as groceries or medication, and has begun acting secretly.

HOW CAN YOU PROTECT INDIVIDUALS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES?

- Monitor the individual's financial statements, and pay attention to unusual financial transactions such as large withdrawals or transfers to other accounts.
- Be cautious of the family members, neighbors and friends that spend a lot of time with the individual. Once they gain the trust of the individual, they may take advantage of the individual and begin stealing. Often, these thieves ask the individual to be quiet about any of their activities.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **241-KIDS**: If the individual is under the age of 20, call the Hamilton County Job and Family Services' 24-hour hotline to report child abuse or neglect.
- **Hamilton County Developmental Disabilities Services' (HCDDS) Major Unusual Incidents and Prevention Unit (MUIP)**: MUIP is a mandated investigative and prevention entity within HCDDS. To report an emergency, call 513-794-3308. To speak with the MUIP Unit help desk, call 513-559-6536.
- **Local Police Department**: If you suspect that someone is stealing from an individual with developmental disabilities, immediately contact your local police department to file a report.



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Public Assistance Fraud & Scams

Common Scams: Cash and Food Assistance
 Medicaid Fraud
 Childcare

Public assistance fraud involves participants that intentionally misrepresent their identity, their income, their familial situation or their living situation in order to gain benefits from public assistance programs such as cash or food assistance, Medicaid or child care subsidies. Public assistance recipients can also be the victim of public assistance scams, often those that result in some type of identity theft.

Statistics:

According to the Ohio Attorney General's office, its Medicaid Fraud Control Unit collected \$87.7 million in 2009 on behalf of Ohio's Medicaid program, and successfully prosecuted 114 individuals for Medicaid provider fraud.

Cash and food assistance fraud

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You receive a text message from an unknown phone number reporting that your EBT or EPPICard is frozen and you need to call them.
- You receive a call from someone claiming to be a representative for EBT or EPPICard requesting either information on your account or your personal identification information.
- You notice there are multiple deductions on your card that you did not approve.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Phone calls or text messages from EBT/EPPICard vendors should be considered fraudulent. This is a scam to obtain information in order to steal your identity or benefits. The vendor does not communicate with cardholders via text messaging nor do they request cardholder information.
- Never write your pin number on the back of the card. This allows others to easily obtain access to the card. If someone uses your pin number to fraudulently obtain your benefits, the benefits will not be replaced.
- Select a pin number that is easy to memorize but never share that number with others. You should request a replacement card if you feel your account has been compromised.
- Safeguard your card and pin numbers when using the card in transactions.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- If you suspect fraudulent activity on your EBT card, call 1-866-320-8822 or visit www.ebt.acs-inc.com.
- If you suspect fraudulent activity on your Ohio EPPICard, call 1-866-386-3071 or visit www.eppicard.com.

Medicaid fraud

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **You have been charged the incorrect co-payment or amount** for your prescription drugs or medical treatment.
- **Your medical provider gives you generic medication** but bills for the brand name medication.
- **You receive a phone call requesting you provide your Medicaid number** for services you can't recall receiving.
- **You receive a bill for charges you know have already been paid** for by Medicaid. You question why the provider is billing for these services again and find it appears to be coded differently.
- **You receive a bill for services or procedures** that should have been free.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Incorrect billing by providers may just be a simple error and not fraud. The important thing to do is ask questions. Contact the provider immediately to inquire about all questionable charges.
- "Phantom" billing occurs when a provider bills for services that have not been performed and is paid accordingly. Providers may also "up code," which happens when a provider bills or codes for a more expensive service than what was rendered. Ask your provider about any questionable services on your bill.
- Always ask any caller for proof of identity as a provider if they ask for your Medicaid number over the phone. You can also call them back at the office to ensure they are a legitimate provider. It is important to safeguard your Medicaid number to prevent fraudulent billing.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Medicaid Consumer Hotline:** To report any activity you suspect is Medicaid fraud or if you have questions concerning services or billing you do not understand, call 1-800-324-8680.

Child care consumer/provider fraud

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SIGNS OF FRAUD?

A licensed or Certified Child Care provider:

- Asks you to sign the voucher at the beginning of the voucher period, and never allows you to review the days and hours billed, OR, signs the voucher without your permission;
- Offers to split the voucher money with you in exchange for your signature on falsified vouchers;
- Asks you to request additional payment for full-time child care so that the provider is paid more, OR, asks you to misrepresent the time your child spent in the provider's care on the voucher to avoid overlaps in the amount of children being cared for by the provider;
- Refuses to give you a receipt for payments made for services;
- Requires you to submit a voucher when care is no longer being provided.

A child care consumer:

- Utilizes child care services unnecessarily while not working or attending school;
- Offers to split the voucher money with you;
- Asks you to bill for more time than the child care provided so the excess payment can be obtained.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS AND PROVIDERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Providers should collect the voucher on the first day that care is provided.
- Consumers should always sign the voucher at the end of the voucher period, reviewing the days and hours billed.
- Consumers and providers should have an agreement regarding the hours that child care will be provided, and the vouchers should reflect that agreement.
- Consumers should request a receipt for all payments received/made for consumer co-payments and other charges for services.
- Consumers should stop in unannounced and observe the provider's business.
- Consumers and providers should report all changes to child care promptly.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU HAVE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Hamilton County Child Care Services:** If you suspect that you have participated or been the victim of child care fraud, you should immediately call 513-946-1800.



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Used-Car Scams

Common Scams: Defective car sales
 "Curbstoners"

Many consumers in the market for a new vehicle opt for previously-owned cars. Used cars can be a bargain for struggling consumers, but purchasing a car with previous owners leaves buyers vulnerable to various fraud and scams by both used-car dealers and private sellers.

Statistics:

According to StopCurbstoning.com, as many as one in five vehicles sold outside of dealerships are not legal private party car sales, but are illegal sales of curbstoned vehicles.

According to Better Business Bureau, the organization received 13,686 complaints concerning used-car auto dealers and 12,736 complaints concerning the auto repair and service industry across North America in 2009.

Defective car sales

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You go to a small used-car dealership to purchase a vehicle. The salesperson allows you to drive a vehicle for a short period of time, and urges you to complete the purchase the same day before another buyer 'snatches the car up.' Shortly after you take the car home, you are forced to make costly repairs to the vehicle in order to keep driving it.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Take the car for an extensive test drive on several different terrains, and operate the vehicle's windshield wipers, lights, radio, heat and air conditioning, horn, etc. to ensure that you won't be stuck with these minor repairs right away. Have an independent mechanic inspect the vehicle before you finalize the purchase.
- Anyone selling more than five (5) motor vehicles in any calendar year must be a licensed dealer. Check online to see the status of a dealer's license at <https://www.dps.state.oh.us/netsys/netdb/ENGLISH/DLRIQ.asp>
- Request the opportunity to have the car inspected/evaluated by a mechanic of your choice prior to purchasing the vehicle.
- Insist on seeing the title to the vehicle to make sure there are no liens on the vehicle. Ensure that the title to the vehicle is in the name of the dealer that is offering the vehicle for sale.
- Do not agree to any sale until you have had time to thoroughly review the contract. Be wary of phrases such as "wear and tear items not included", and request a detailed description of what is, and is not, covered by the vehicle's warranty. Many used cars are sold "as is," meaning that there is no warranty coverage. Your paperwork will include a page disclosing whether the vehicle purchased is "as is" or includes a warranty. If you are offered a warranty or extended service contract at an additional cost, be sure to understand what is covered, what costs you may be responsible for and where you can take your vehicle for service.
- Never feel pressured to make an immediate decision. Shop around at multiple dealerships and look at a number of cars. Do your research on issues such as cost & value, safety, reliability, etc. for the vehicle makes and models that you are considering.
- Ohio lemon law does not cover used cars. However, ask the dealer if the vehicle has ever been returned because of lemon law defects or complaints. Also ensure that the vehicle has been inspected for collision damage and repairs, and has been found to be without. Amend the warranty to include both these statements, and ask the dealer to sign off, in order to have recourse should you have problems with the vehicle.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** If you've believe you've been misled about the used vehicle you purchased you should contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515).
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.

Defective car sales, continued

- **Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles:** If you feel the dealer has given you fraudulent information regarding your used car, file a complaint with the Ohio BMV (614-752-7500 or www.bmv.ohio.gov):

Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles
ATTN: Investigations
P.O. Box 16784
Columbus, Ohio 43216-6784...

“Curbstoner”

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You contact a private seller that advertised a used car in the newspaper. The seller asks you to meet him/her in a vacant lot or along a street, where the car is parked. You are asked to pay in cash, and the title of the vehicle is not in the seller's name.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- If a seller asks you to pick the car up in a vacant lot or along the side of a street-curb, beware. These 'curbstoners' often operate by buying used cars and then reselling them at a profit.
- Do not purchase any vehicle with a title that isn't in the name of the seller. These sellers do not comply with state or federal laws, and you have no consumer protection in your purchases. Insist on seeing the title to the vehicle to make sure there are no liens on the vehicle, and make sure to confirm that the name on the title matches the name on the seller's driver's license.
- Conduct a Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) search with the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) to check the mileage on the car. Curbstoners often roll back the odometer to raise the price on the vehicle. Pay attention to other signs that the vehicle may be marked up.
- Never agree to purchase any vehicle that you have not first seen in person. Internet sellers can easily defraud a buyer for partial or full payment of a car that is misrepresented or does not exist.
- Don't be afraid to ask the seller questions about the mileage on the car, the amount of time they've owned the vehicle, why they're selling the car or how the car operates. Consider using one of the popular web based services (such as carfax.com) to check on the service and repair history of a vehicle, and make sure you trust your instincts about the seller.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles:** If you feel you have been sold a lemon or the seller has given you fraudulent information regarding your used car, file a complaint with the Ohio BMV (614-752-7500; www.bmv.ohio.gov):

Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles
ATTN: Investigations
P.O. Box 16784
Columbus, Ohio 43216-6784



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Charity Scams, Sweepstakes and Contests

Common Scams: Charity Scams
 Sweepstakes and Contests
 Free Trial Offers

Charity scams and fraudulent sweepstakes take advantage of a consumer's desire to win. These scams are often perpetrated through the mail or online, and act as vehicles for identity theft from victims. Charity scams and sweepstakes are especially effective during difficult economic times, when consumers might be more susceptible to ploys disguised as 'something for nothing.'

Statistics:

According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), 'Prize/Sweepstakes and Lotteries' was ranked the highest category of fraud complaints in Ohio in 2006, with 1,746 complaints filed with the FTC.¹

¹2007 Consumer Fraud & Identity Theft Complaint Data, Federal Trade Commission, <http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2007/02/topcomplaints/PDF%20State%20Releases/tc2007Ohio.pdf>

Charity scams

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- **The charity is not properly registered with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as a 501(c)(3) charity, eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions.**
- **The charity employs high pressure fundraising tactics by:**
 - o sending “runners” to pick up contributions from your home,
 - o disguising donation requests as a bill and threatening collection actions for a failure to pay,
 - o suggesting you are legally bound to fulfill a pledge, which you may or may not have committed to make and are under no obligation to fulfill,
 - o employing telemarketers who do not clearly articulate the name of the charity for which it is soliciting or who provide vague responses to questions asked by donors,
 - o implying a larger percent of your contribution will support the charity’s programs than is true, or
 - o selling typically inexpensive goods for an inflated price (e.g., a box of garbage bags or light bulbs for a \$50.00 donation).
- **The charity’s request is long on emotion, but short on details.**
 - o The charity fails to provide a current address where its services are conducted or refuses to provide a roster of its board of directors, management team, or key employees.
 - o The charity uses vague statements to describe its services (e.g., “we help kids succeed”), and when pressed for details, cannot or refuses to disclose exactly what services they provide.
 - o The charity impatiently responds to requests for more information about its services or finances, pressuring you to give without answering all your questions.

HOW CAN DONORS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- **Give only when you feel confident.** Legitimate charities will accept your donation whenever you are ready. Listen to your instincts; make sure all your questions are answered. Don't give in to pressure about suggested donations. Legitimate charities appreciate donations of any amount, and will not use high-pressure tactics.
- **Be cautious about giving to charities that represent that 100% of your contribution will support programs.** Today's costs of operating a charity make it virtually impossible for a charity to direct 100% of your contribution to program activities.
- **Verify that the charity is properly registered with the IRS** to receive tax-deductible contributions by calling 1-800-829-5500 or visiting www.irs.gov.
- **Check out the charity with BBB (Better Business Bureau)** by calling 513-421-3015 or visiting www.cincinnati.bbb.org.
- **Contact the charity directly** to verify the accuracy of claims made by its fundraiser or telemarketer. Legitimate charities understand that you are contributing your hard-earned money, so they will be willing to assist you by providing as much information as possible about their charity.
- **Be wary of every opportunity** that presents itself – especially when it presents itself in the wake of some big disaster that gets a lot of media attention.

Charity scams, continued

- If you are familiar with a particular organization, **call the charity directly** to ensure a campaign is being conducted and the individual at your door is authorized to collect donations on their behalf. Fraudulent ID cards are a common practice for scammers.
- **Do not give cash.** It is unlikely you will be able to recover these funds if stolen. **Guard your credit card number.** Call the charity directly – get their contact information from the phonebook – to make a contribution using a credit card. Review your billing statement for any suspicious activity, and dispute fraudulent charges with your credit card company as soon as noticed. **Never write a check to an individual.** Checks should only be made payable to the charity.
- The [Charity Rating Guide](#) provides information that will help you in your giving decisions. You can also contact the charity in which you're interested directly to determine if their mission and philosophy match yours.
- At the beginning of each year, decide in advance which charities you'll be supporting, and how much you'll be donating. This will give you time to do your research and will help you gracefully turn down requests for other contributions.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.
- **Attorney General:** call the Attorney General's office in the state in which the charity is located to file a complaint and seek assistance in resolving the dispute.
 - o Ohio: 1-800-282-0515 or www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov.
 - o Kentucky: 1-888-432-9257 or www.ag.ky.gov
 - o Indiana: 1-800-382-5516 or www.in.gov
- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC):** call 1-216-263-3455 to notify the FTC division overseeing charity fraud.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** If you believe you are the victim of an Internet crime, you may contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes.

Sweepstakes and contests

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS A SCAM?

- You receive a letter, postcard, e-mail or telephone call announcing that you've won a prize in a sweepstakes, contest or foreign lottery, even though you don't remember entering or competing. The communication tells you to contact a number or Web site to claim your cash or prize, where you are asked to supply personal information, including your social security number, your bank account information or your credit card information. You may be asked to wire money to pay for taxes or other fees to collect your winnings.
- In some instances, you may be sent a check for the award proceeds along with instructions to cash the check and wire some amount for taxes or other fees.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Do not share personal information with strangers unless you're absolutely sure they are reputable professionals. If you do not remember entering a sweepstakes or contest, be extremely cautious – if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
- Do your research when considering interaction with any company or organization. Take advantage of the resources at Better Business Bureau (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org), and make sure this business has a history of responsible conduct with consumers.
- If you become uncomfortable interacting with any sweepstakes or contest representative on the phone, remember that you can always hang up and call back later. If their sweepstakes giveaway or contest prize is legitimate, it will be there when you call back. Do your research before you call back or supply any personal information. Ask the sweepstakes promoter for the name, address, phone number and other contact information for the sweepstakes promoter.
- Do not wire funds in order to claim a prize. If you need to pay a fee, you did not win anything.
- If you have been presented a check to cash and wire funds back, there's a good chance that the check is counterfeit.
- If you've been told that you've won a foreign lottery and need to pay money for taxes or other fees to claim your prize, take caution. Foreign lotteries are illegal.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Ohio Attorney General's office:** Many sweepstakes and contests result in identity theft. Always monitor your credit card and bank statements, your credit report and any other financial transactions, and immediately contact the Ohio Attorney General's office (800-282-0515) if you think your identity has been stolen.
- **Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3):** If you believe you are the victim of an Internet crime, you may contact the IC3 at www.ic3.gov. The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center. Complaints submitted to the IC3 cover an array of cyber crime and fraud schemes.

Sweepstakes and contests, continued

- **Local Postmaster:** If any part of the scam was perpetrated through the mail, you can file a complaint with the Postal Inspection Service at <https://postalinspectors.uspis.gov/>.
- **Better Business Bureau (BBB):** You should also submit a complaint to BBB (513-421-3015 or www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to report the problem and to receive assistance with resolving the dispute.

Free trial offers

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS FRAUD?

- **You receive an offer for a free trial of a health product**, such as diet or weight loss pills or cures or treatment for ailments. You are asked to provide a credit card number to pay for the shipping and handling of your free trial, but you notice that after the free trial period ends, you still receive and are billed for the product.

HOW CAN CONSUMERS PROTECT THEMSELVES?

- Some legitimate companies offer free trials. However, this scam is based on the assumption that the consumer will not read or understand the terms of the free trial – including the automatic enrollment to continue receiving and paying for a product you may not need. Read all of the terms of the free trial, and do not be pressured into ordering the product before you've had time to review with a trusted friend.
- Be extremely wary of any company that offers a free trial of its product. Research the company with Better Business Bureau (www.cincinnati.bbb.org) to ensure the company has a history of responsible conduct.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM

- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC)**: Contact the FTC (1-202-FTC-HELP) to report a free trial scam.
- **Credit card company**: Immediately call your credit card company and dispute the charges. Ask them to reverse the charges – if a credit card company receives enough complaints about a company, it will be more likely to reverse charges in the future.



HAMILTON COUNTY COALITION to **STOP** FRAUD, SCAMS & ABUSE



Government Fraud, Waste & Abuse

Incidents of government fraud, waste and abuse are especially important to combat, given the source of the stolen or abused resources: the money, equipment or time involved in this crime is funded by our taxpayers. Tips that report this type of fraud are especially effective in efforts to protect our taxpayer dollars from dishonest behavior.

Statistics:

According to the State of Ohio – Office of the Inspector General, the office received a total of 431 complaints in 2009, which included allegations of fraud, waste, abuse, corruption or conflicts of interest in government.¹

¹2009 Annual Report, State of Ohio – Office of the Inspector General,
<http://watchdog.ohio.gov/annualreport/2009annualreport.pdf>

Government fraud & waste

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT THIS IS ILLEGAL?

- You work for a government agency that handles sensitive personal information of residents in its jurisdiction. You've noticed that some of your co-workers access that sensitive information more than they should, and at unauthorized times.
- You work for a government agency, and you notice suspicious activity by those handling money in your office.
- You work for a government agency and have noticed the waste or abuse of taxpayer-supported materials, like vehicles and office equipment, by co-workers or employees of other municipalities.
- You have personal knowledge that procurement rules are not being followed or taxpayer dollars are being misspent outside of their intended use.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU SUSPECT GOVERNMENT FRAUD OR WASTE

- **HAMILTON COUNTY:** If you think you have observed unethical behavior as an employee of Hamilton County, please report to your supervisor or their manager. You can also contact the Human Resources Department or the Chair of the Hamilton County Ethics Commission, Tonia Edwards (513) 946-4520.
- **Ohio Auditor of State (AOS):** To report government fraud, waste or abuse in any jurisdiction in Ohio, you should contact the Ohio AOS's office. [Click here to report government fraud online](#). You can also call the Auditor of State's Special Investigations Unit (SIU) at **1-866-FRAUD OH (1-866-372-8364)** or mail a written complaint:

Ohio Auditor of State's Office
Special Investigations Unit
88 East Broad Street
P.O. Box 1140
Columbus, OH 43215