



Family Finances: Protect your money from scam artists

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By Gail Liberman and Alan Lavine

It's getting tougher to protect your family's money.

The latest scary statistic on financial crime: Some 80 percent of the skyrocketing losses attributed to mortgage fraud involves collaboration or collusion by financial institution insiders. This, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

With that in mind, here are some of the latest financial scams to avoid:

- **Mortgage foreclosure scams.** Are you overextended from last year's real estate boom? If making your mortgage payments is getting harder, a scam artist may offer to take a title for a year or two and make payments. Once he or she has your title, your property is sold out from under you with the scam artist pocketing the cash.
- **Authentic-looking but false communications from well-known government agencies,** such as the IRS, FDIC and National Credit Union Administration, requesting personal information. Don't respond or click on e-mail hyperlinks or attachments without calling the agency directly. Get the phone number independently from directory assistance!
- **Fraudulent Medicare prescription drug plans.** The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services says scam artists are targeting people with disabilities and asking for money and checking account information to get them to enroll.
- **Free, but fraudulent online investment newsletters** may claim to independently research stocks they profile. They either spread false information or promote worthless stocks, says the Securities and Exchange Commission. Some drive up the price of the stock with their recommendations and sell their own holdings for substantial profits.
- **Work-at-home schemes.** You answer a utopian ad, often in a reputable newspaper, offering money simply for evaluating a company's customer service. You're sent a check upfront to deposit in your checking account. You're then encouraged to write a check out of your account for an item or service, and mail it to a respected company, such as Wal-Mart. However, the check you've deposited in your account is bogus. If it clears, you could be liable to your bank not only for that amount, but also for overdraft fees.
- **Gift cards you purchase** either may be counterfeit or have the personal identification number scratched off and used by a thief. Keep the original receipt for the card in case you learn its value already has been used.

Why not join us in petitioning Congress to:

- **Consolidate U.S. bank and other financial services regulatory agencies,** and create an

independent financial services consumer advocate. The huge number of federal and state financial regulatory agencies dramatically hinders financial crime tracking and enforcement.

■ Centralize U.S. government financial crime statistics, including those for identity theft, in one government agency with enforcement authority.

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