



Consumer Complaints:

Online: <https://consumercomplaints.fcc.gov>

Phone: (888) 225-5322

TTY: (888) 835-5322

Videophone: 1-844-432-2275

Media Contact:

Will Wiquist, (202) 418-0509

will.wiquist@fcc.gov

For Immediate Release

CONSUMER ALERT: UTILITIES CALL SCAM
Beware of Callers Posing as Utility Employees Demanding Immediate Payment

WASHINGTON, November 15, 2016 – The Federal Communications Commission is alerting consumers to be on the lookout for callers pretending to be utility company employees demanding immediate payment, often by prepaid debit cards, credit cards, or gift cards. As American consumers prepare for winter months when many people would be endangered by an interruption to heating fuel, the FCC’s Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau wanted to make consumers aware of this scam and prepared to protect themselves.

Key Consumer Tip: If consumers receive a call warning them of a balance they do not believe they owe their utility, they should hang up, independently look up their utility company’s phone number on a recent statement or legitimate website, and call that number to verify the legitimacy of the call.

In this scam, the caller typically poses as a representative of the consumer’s actual local utility, stating that immediate payment will ensure that the consumer’s heating service will not be disconnected. The scammers are known to spoof utility company telephone numbers so the caller ID makes it appear to be a call from the utility company. These scammers often use automated interactive voice response calling systems that mimic legitimate providers’ calls. After consumers, many of whom are older adults, follow instructions via interactive prompts, they are connected to a live “customer service representative” who asks for the access code for a credit, debit, or gift card. This information allows the scammer to cash out the card or sell it to a third party.

Anyone who believes they have been targeted by this scam should immediately report the incident to their actual utility company, to local police, to the Federal Trade Commission’s [Complaint Assistant](#), and to the FCC’s [Consumer Help Center](#).

Consumers should always be on alert for this scam and others. The following tips can help ward off unwanted calls and scams:

- Do not answer calls from unknown numbers. Let them go to voicemail.

- If you are unclear if a caller is legitimate, hang up, look up the company’s phone number independently on your recent bill or their legitimate website, and contact them through an official number, web form or email address to see if they called you. By initiating the communication yourself, you can verify that the request for payment is legitimate
- If you answer and the caller (often a recording) asks you to hit a button to stop getting the calls, just hang up. Scammers often use these tricks to identify – and then target – live respondents.
- If you receive a scam call, write down the number and file a complaint with the FCC and other appropriate authorities so we can help identify and take appropriate action to help consumers targeted by illegal callers.
- Ask your phone service provider if it offers a robocall blocking service that allows subscribers to block unwanted calls. If not, encourage your provider to start offering a blocking service. You can also visit the FCC’s [website](#) on “[Web Resources for Blocking Robocalls](#)” for information and resources on available robocall blocking tools to help you reduce unwanted calls.
- Legitimate utility companies will not demand payment via gift cards.

As the agency that implements and enforces the Telephone Consumer Protection Act, the FCC reviews all consumer complaints and will continue, when appropriate, to issue consumer alerts based on those complaints and other public information related to possible scams and frauds. This is part of a new, standing series of consumer alerts from the FCC in hopes of informing, protecting, and empowering consumers.

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Office of Media Relations: (202) 418-0500

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