

Rental Scam Alert

During the past few weeks four Ventura residents have fallen victim to rental scams. The scammers have listed home rentals on Craigslist and Zillow. In one case the victim toured the home they intended to rent and then sent the deposit and first month's rent. The home was for rent, but the scammer was not the owner of the home. The scammer used the empty home to con the victim into believing they were the property manager.

Please use caution when looking for a rental! As you consider issues like size, cost, and location of the rental, also consider this: that rental listing could be a scam. Scammers often advertise rentals that don't exist or aren't available to trick people into sending money before they find out the truth.

Scammers know that finding the right rental can be hard work, and a seemingly good deal is hard to pass up. They've been known to game some home or vacation rental websites. The take-away: when you're looking for a rental use caution!

Hijacked Ads: Some scammers hijack a real rental or real estate listing by changing the email address or other contact information and then they place the modified ad on another site. The altered ad may even use the name of the person who posted the original ad. In other cases, scammers have hijacked the email accounts of property owners on reputable rental websites.

Phantom Rentals: Other scammers make up listings for places that aren't for rent or don't exist and try to lure you in with the promise of low rent, or great amenities. Their goal is to get your money before you find out.

Signs of a Scam: Being savvy when you're in search of a rental is well worth the effort. Here are some signs you may be dealing with a scam:

They tell you to wire money: This is the surest sign of a scam. There's never a good reason to wire money to pay a security deposit, application fee, first month's rent, or vacation rental fee. That's true even if they send you a contract first. Wiring money is the same as sending cash — once you send it, you have no way to get it back.

They want a security deposit or first month's rent before you've met or signed a lease. It's never a good idea to send money to someone you've never met in person for a home you haven't seen. If you can't visit an apartment or house yourself, ask someone you trust to go and confirm that it's for rent, and that it is what was advertised. In addition to setting up a meeting, do a search on the owner and listing. If you find the same ad listed under a different name, that's a clue it may be a scam.

They say they're out of the country: But they have a plan to get the keys into your hands. It might involve a lawyer or an "agent" working on their behalf. Some scammers even create fake keys. Don't send money to them overseas. If you can't meet in person, see the home, or sign a lease before you pay, keep looking.

If you find yourself the target of a rental scam please report to the Ventura Police Department at 805-339-4400 and to the Federal Trade Commission www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov.