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NYS Division Of Consumer Protection And The NYS Department Of Public Service Alerts Consumers Of Scammers Pretending To Be From Utility Companies

Scammers Claim Utilities Will be Shut Off Unless Consumer Makes Immediate Payment

Consumers Should be Alert and Follow Basic Tips to Keep Information Protected

The New York State Division of Consumer Protection (DCP) and the NYS Department of Public Service is alerting consumers of phone calls in which scammers, pretending to be from electric companies are looking for overdue payments and threatening to suspend electricity services unless they receive a payment immediately. Payment has been requested by means of untraceable services such as gift cards, and money transfer apps, including PayPal and Zelle.

“Scammers use persuasive tactics to try to get their hands on unsuspecting consumers’ money, before they have time to confirm what scammers are telling them,” said New York State Secretary of State Rossana Rosado. “Like many others, this latest utility scam is prying on vulnerable New Yorkers who believe in the empty threats to shut off their utilities. New York consumers should be aware of some basic tips to keep their hard-earned money safe from scammers.”

Department of Public Service CEO Rory Christian said, “It is simply and plainly wrong that scammers try to take advantage of consumers, especially during these uncertain times. New York has taken strong action to protect consumers, including a moratorium on shutoffs for customers financially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. New Yorkers should call or contact their utility directly if there is any question about the status of the consumer’s utility service.”

The calls reported to DCP are coming from scammers purporting to be from New York electric and gas utilities. The scammers claim that the consumers’ utilities will be shut off in minutes due to an outstanding account balance unless the consumer makes immediate payment. The scammer then asks for consumer information, including utility account numbers, social security numbers, and dates of birth, and demands payment for alleged past-due bills. Scammers will demand payment, in form of financial technologies, which includes cash apps and bitcoin, to bilk thousands of dollars from unsuspecting costumers.

Utilities give repeated notices prior to terminations including reaching out to consumers with past due balances by phone to offer payment options. However, utilities do not specify that the payment must be a prepaid card or other non-traceable money transfer. If someone demands

payment via non-traceable method, consumers just need to pull the plug on these scams by hanging up the phone and reporting the calls.

To avoid falling victim to these scams, consumers should follow the tips below:

- Hang up and call the utility company yourself. Call the company using the number on your bill or the utility company's website even if the person who contacted you left a call-back number. Often, those call-back numbers are fake. If the message came by text, don't respond. If your bill says you owe anything, pay it as you normally would, not as the caller says.
- Consumers should never give out personal information such as account numbers, Social Security numbers, date of birth, mother's maiden names, passwords or other identifying information in response to unexpected calls or if they are at all suspicious. Consumers should not respond to any questions, especially those that can be answered with "Yes" or "No." Consumers should exercise caution if they are being pressured for information immediately.
- Utility companies do not ask for payments via gift cards or cash transfer apps. Gift cards allow scammers to get money without a trace. Real utility companies issue several disconnection warnings before shutting off utilities and they never demand money over the phone or specify a method of payment. The utility may call customers to discuss payment plans, but will NOT call the customers to threaten. The utility primarily communicates via letters, bills, emails and authorized texts.
- Use call blocking tools from your phone provider and check into apps that block calls. The FCC allows phone companies to block robocalls by default based on reasonable analytics (see fcc.gov/robocalls).
- Do not rely on the number that comes up on your phone. Callers can "spoof" the number to look like a government agency or local utility company. If someone has contacted an individual and they are suspicious, they should hang up and go directly to the official website for the agency or utility company or call the number on their utility bill to confirm whether there is a problem with their account.
- File a complaint with the Division of Consumer Protection.

The New York State Division of Consumer Protection investigates Do Not Call violations and provides voluntary mediation between a consumer and a business when a consumer has been unsuccessful at reaching a resolution on their own. The Consumer Assistance Helpline 1-800-697-1220 is available Monday to Friday from 8:30am to 4:30pm, excluding State Holidays, and consumer complaints can be filed at any time at www.dos.ny.gov/consumerprotection. The Division can also be reached via Twitter at [@NYSConsumer](https://twitter.com/NYSConsumer) or Facebook at www.facebook.com/nysconsumer.

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