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NYS DIVISION OF CONSUMER PROTECTION AND DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SERVICE REMIND CONSUMERS TO BE ALERT OF PHONE SCAMMERS SPOOFING UTILITY COMPANIES

Phone Scammers Claim Payment is Needed to Try to Steal Personal Information; Consumers Should be Alert and Follow Basic Tips to Keep Information Protected

The New York State Division of Consumer Protection (DCP) and the Department of Public Service are alerting consumers of a phone scam in which scammers, pretending to be from a utility company, call individuals and threaten to suspend electricity services unless they receive a payment immediately. Payment has been requested by means of untraceable services such as gift cards, including Green Dot cards and money transfer apps, including Cash App.

Pursuant to Governor Cuomo's March 13th directive, the Department of Public Service worked with the State's utility companies to ensure no New Yorkers would have their utilities cutoff for nonpayment during the PAUSE. Similar action was taken during Super Storm Sandy, the 2014 Polar Vortex, and the 2008 financial crisis.

"Scammers are unscrupulous and will stop at nothing to get their hands-on New Yorkers' hard-earned money. These latest scams are targeting vulnerable New Yorkers by scaring them with empty threats to shut off their utilities," said New York State Secretary of State Rossana Rosado. "New Yorkers should be aware of these scammers and follow basic safety tips to avoid falling victim."

Department of Public Service CEO John B. Rhodes said, "It is flat-out wrong that scammers try to take advantage of consumers, especially during these

uncertain times. Governor Cuomo has taken strong action to protect consumers, including a moratorium on shut-offs, and New Yorkers should call their utility to ensure their rights.”

In addition, calls have also been reported to be coming from scammers purporting to be from New York electric and gas utilities. The callers ask for consumer information, including utility account numbers, social security numbers, and dates of birth, and request payment for alleged past-due bills. Scammers will demand payment, make threats to turn off power, and try to rush customers into making an immediate payment. Similar to a Social Security scam detailed in June of 2019, in these cases the caller “spoofs” official phone numbers of state agencies or utility companies call individuals seeking information

that could be used to steal identities. Spoofing is when a caller deliberately falsifies the information transmitted to a caller ID display to disguise their identity, according to the Federal Communications Commission. In actuality, the call could be coming from anywhere in the world.

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

- Consumers should never give out personal information such as account numbers, Social Security numbers, 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.
- Government agencies and 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.
- 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.

If a consumer receives this or any other scam calls, they are encouraged to 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.