



Wisconsin Identity Theft Complaints Spike in 2015

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Editor's Note: The top ten categories with complaint counts are included on page three.

MADISON – The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) has just released the Top Ten Consumer Complaints of 2015, and while it closely mirrors the 2014 list, there is one compelling change – the rise of identity theft into third place.

The 2015 list puts the spotlight on identity theft and “impostor” phone scams as top concerns for Wisconsin consumers last year. A review of the complaints received by the agency shows that telemarketing remains the perennial leader among complaint categories, bolstered by a rash of threatening phone scams, while tax-related rip-offs drove the identity theft category to the most significant jump in complaints in the top ten.

While the identity theft complaint category only moved up one spot in the list to third, the number of complaints in the category increased nearly 80% from 2014. Tax identity theft was a factor in almost 85% of the identity theft complaints as stolen personal information led to fraudulent tax filings of victims throughout the state. Nationwide, tax- or wage-related fraud is also the leading factor in identity theft complaints reported to the Federal Trade Commission.

“Tax season is upon us, so we need to take extra precautions to keep our Social Security number and other personal information safe and secure to avoid being a victim of tax fraud,” said Frank Frassetto, Division Administrator for Trade and Consumer Protection. “Because you may not know that you are a victim of identity theft until your tax return request is rejected by the IRS or your state, shred unnecessary documents that contain personal or financial information, regularly monitor your credit reports for unauthorized accounts and other inconsistencies, and file your taxes early to get a jump on any identity thieves who may have access to your information.”

Telemarketing led consumer complaints for DATCP again in 2015 (up nearly 18% from 2014), constituting nearly one in every four complaints to the agency. But unlike the early years of the Wisconsin No Call program when complaints were typically about salespeople calling to sell items to consumers, recent complaints often report fraudulent, threatening phone calls demanding money or personal information. In particular, government impostor scams impacted Wisconsin residents last year, with con artists falsely claiming to represent a number of state or federal agencies in order to shake down consumers. Fake IRS phone calls alone constituted 13.6% of all telemarketing complaints.

Robocalls about reducing credit debt were another major headache for Wisconsin residents, with 12.6% of telemarketing complaints referencing calls from “Credit Card Services” or a variant of that name. Other fraudulent phone operations that heavily targeted Wisconsin consumers involved scammers claiming to represent computer tech support companies, local utilities, medical providers, and sweepstakes and lottery organizations. Regardless of the pitch, these scammers were always seeking money or personal and banking information.

“In 2015, DATCP launched a new ‘fast track’ telemarketing complaint form on its website to give consumers who register on the Wisconsin Do Not Call Registry a simpler, quicker tool for reporting unwanted calls and text messages to the Consumer Protection Bureau,” said Frassetto.

“The more data we receive about possible violations of the state’s Do Not Call law, the better able we are to fight back against these intrusive practices and work with the Federal Trade Commission in the fight against national and international operations.”

(MORE)

Complaint data shared by DATCP with its federal partners has been instrumental in judgments taken nationwide against a number of fraudsters and serial violators of both state and federal Do Not Call laws. These cases have involved illegal practices including business directory scams, fake medical discount plans targeting seniors and Spanish-speaking consumers, and the illegal use of contact information from sweepstakes entries.

Landlord/Tenant complaints remained steady from 2014, holding at second on the list. Issues that typically led to complaints in this category included disputes over security deposits, unauthorized entry, inadequate disclosures, and evictions.

“The best protection for landlords and tenants alike is to read and understand the provisions in the lease and to stay abreast of changes in the law,” said Frassetto.

To assist both parties, DATCP provides a comprehensive Landlord/Tenant Guide that outlines state laws regarding landlord/tenant relations. This free document is available both on the DATCP website and by calling the Consumer Protection Hotline at 800-422-7128.

One complaint category that dropped a spot in 2015 was telecommunications. This category includes bundling of services, cellular phones, internet service providers, long distance services, and satellite and cable television.

The home improvement category moved up one spot to fifth. Some of the major factors in home improvement complaints included allegations of misrepresentation, failure to honor contracts, workmanship, and theft.

Rounding out the top ten for 2015 were the motor vehicle repair (6th); gas pump accuracy (7th); motor vehicle sales (8th); computer and equipment (9th); and radio/TV/video/stereo (10th) complaint categories.

“Identity theft and scams aside, one similarity that most complaints have in common is allegations of untrue or misleading advertisements or disputes about contractual agreements,” said Frassetto. “Consumers can protect themselves by asking questions upfront, refusing high-pressure sales pitches, getting all sales terms and conditions in writing, and reading the fine print on sales and rental agreements before signing.”

For additional information on the Top Ten Consumer Complaints of 2015 list or to file a complaint, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at datcp.wi.gov, call the Consumer Protection Hotline at 800-422-7128, or send an email to datcph hotline@wisconsin.gov.

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Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection

CONSUMER COMPLAINT STATISTICS
YEAR 2015

<u>RANK</u> <u>IN 2015</u>	<u>PRODUCT/PROBLEM</u>	<u>2015 - # OF</u> <u>COMPLAINTS</u>	<u>2014 - # OF</u> <u>COMPLAINTS</u>
The top ten PRODUCT categories are:			
1	Telemarketing (Do Not Call)	2,550	2,166
2	Landlord/Tenant	1,407	1,349
3	Identity Theft	823	460
4	Telecommunications	754	1,091
5	Home Improvement	426	403
6	Motor Vehicle Repair	270	222
7	Gas Pump Accuracy	251	328
8	Motor Vehicle Sales (Used & New)	220	222
9	Computer & Equipment	124	133
10	Radio/TV/Video/Stereo	114	68

Total number of complaints recorded in 2015: 10,787