



Fake Vacation and Rental Property Deals and Other Online Classified Ad Risks

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Media Contact: Jerad Albracht, 608-224-5007
Bill Cosh, Communications Director, 608-224-5020

MADISON – Online classified advertisements on websites like Craigslist, Etsy or eBay Classifieds are a double-edged sword. On one hand, they offer a convenient means of setting up transactions like buying or selling goods, posting or finding jobs, and listing or seeking rental properties. But on the other hand, the open nature of these sites that appeals to their users also appeals to scammers.

With the summer travel season underway, be on the lookout for too-good-to-be-true vacation and house rental deals in online classified ads. A disturbing trend involves scammers ripping pictures and descriptions of properties from real estate listings and posting the information to a classified ad as a rental property. When interested renters inquire, the “owner” of the rental claims to be out of town and offers to send the keys for the property if a security deposit and first month’s rent are paid upfront, typically by wire transfer. These crooks just take the money and run.

Imposter scams are the primary ways con artists use these sites to victimize the public. Fraudsters regularly post fake ads for rentals, employment opportunities and products for sale. According to Craigslist’s safety page, most of these rip-offs share a number of common characteristics:

- You are interacting by email or text with someone who is not in your area;
- The transaction begins with a vague initial inquiry and the back and forth communications are riddled with spelling and grammatical errors;
- You are asked to make a payment by wire transfer, prepaid debit card, PayPal or another service that provides instant transactions that leave little trace; and
- The other party either refuses to meet or claims to be unable to meet face-to-face to complete the transaction.

Some tips to remember when dealing with another party through an online classified ad:

- If you are making a purchase or selling an item, deal locally and meet face-to-face with the other party in a public place. Some police departments offer their constituents their station lobbies or parking lots as “safe zones” to use for transactions (call your local department to inquire before establishing it as the meeting point).
- Always be suspicious of over-the-top claims and too-good-to-be-true prices.
- Never wire funds to strangers or provide the code and PIN from a prepaid debit or gift card.
- Never rent a property sight unseen or provide information for a background check for a rental or a job until you have met a potential landlord or employer in person.
- If someone sends you a check and asks you to cash it and return a portion or send a portion to another person, it is a scam.

For additional information or to file a complaint, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at <http://datcp.wi.gov>, send an e-mail to datcp hotline@wisconsin.gov or call the Consumer Information Hotline toll-free at 1-800-422-7128.

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