



NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE <

Summer Utility Scams Spark Warning BBB, energy firms note spike in attempts

Burnsville, Minnesota – July 16, 2015 – Better Business Bureau of Minnesota and North Dakota ® (BBB) is warning consumers and business owners to be on alert for phone calls or even visits from people at their doorstep trying to collect money fraudulently by claiming utility bills are overdue and must be paid immediately. Fraudsters usually claim that unless payment is made, service will be halted immediately. This scheme, called the ‘utility scam,’ has hit our area in the past and though it’s attempted year-round, it tends to heat up in the summertime.

BBB reminds consumers and business owners not to be pressured into making payments on the spot and to contact their utility companies directly if the status of their account is called into question or if they suspect the possibility of fraud.

According to information provided by local utility companies, scammers are trying new tactics in an effort to defraud the public and business community:

- One report said fraudsters, claiming to be with an established utility firm, contacted a homeowner by phone recently and promised them \$1,000 if they would allow them to come in and discuss a home energy audit.
- Another report states that small business owners in the Duluth area are being contacted by people falsely claiming to represent utility companies and demanding payment or service will be halted.
- Another instance of attempted fraud occurred in the South Metro, when scammers posing as utility employees showed up at a person’s home and demanded payment or their power would be shut off.

“This is a particularly bold scam and both locally and nationally it’s been successful,” said Dana Badgerow, president and CEO of BBB of Minnesota and North Dakota. “It’s important to know who you’re dealing with and to always verify whatever information you’re given.”

To avoid falling victim to this scheme, BBB advises the following:

- Keep in mind that while utility companies will visit properties (commercial and residential) whose accounts are long overdue, this is usually the final step taken. They will first make every effort to establish contact and collect payment through the mail. They will also give you an opportunity to independently verify the status of your bill.
- If a utility representative comes to your door seeking payment, ask for a company ID card. Call your utility company to verify that they are an employee. Do not invite the individual inside and look up the number yourself either via the Internet or a phone book. The person on your doorstep could give you incorrect contact information.
- If you receive a call and have doubts about a caller's identity or suspicions about the purpose of the call, hang up and contact your utility directly to verify your account status. Don't assume the information you're being given is accurate.
- Make sure all residents of your home are clear on the status of utility bills. Scammers profit from uncertainty.
- Be aware that many utility companies offer payment options if your account is in arrears or if you need assistance. Visit their website or contact them directly for more details.
- Contact BBB with questions about suspicious calls or unusual offers toll-free at 1-800-646-6222.

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The mission of Better Business Bureau is to be the leader in building marketplace trust by promoting, through self-regulation, the highest standards of business ethics and conduct, and to instill confidence in responsible businesses through programs of education and action that inform, assist and protect the general public. We are open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Contact BBB at bbb.org or 651-699-1111, toll-free at 1-800-646-6222.

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