Sep 21, 2020

Contact Kylie Mason

Phone 850-245-0150

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL STATE OF FLORIDA

Florida Attorney General's Office News Release

Beware of Price Gouging, Disaster Scams and Fraud in the Aftermath of Sally



TALLAHASSEE, Fla.—In the aftermath of the destruction and flooding left by Hurricane Sally, Attorney General Ashley Moody is warning those in impacted areas to guard against price gouging, contracting scams and fraud. Attorney General Moody's Price Gouging Hotline remains open and accessible for consumers to report extreme price increases and storm-related scams.

Attorney General Ashley Moody said, "Hurricane Sally brought destruction to property and the lives of thousands of Floridians. Sadly, these events often bring with them a wave of fraud and other types of crime. Anyone who steals from Floridians in this time of crisis will be caught and prosecuted. My office and local law enforcement will work tirelessly to protect Floridians, but citizens can help by taking steps to protect themselves."

After a natural disaster, consumers should be wary of tree service scams, building and home repair scams, disaster relief scams and water testing and treatment scams.

Additionally, if you suspect criminal activity such as looting, robbery or any violent crime, call 911 immediately.

Building Repair and Contractors: After a disaster, qualified contractors are in high demand, providing opportunity for scam artists to take advantage of those finding it difficult to find help. If your home is damaged, be sure to follow these tips when hiring a contractor:

- Watch out for unsolicited offers or contractors claiming they can perform repairs at a discount with leftover supplies from another job;
- Have your insurance company evaluate damage before arranging repairs to ensure that the work will be covered under your policy;
- Get at least three written, itemized estimates or bids on repairs;
- Verify a contractor has a license with local and state licensing boards;
- Additionally, ensure the contractor is licensed for the job. Check to see if a company is properly licensed and if there are any consumer complaints filed against a licensed contractor at the Department of Professional Business Regulation's website, MyFloridaLicense.com;
- Research the company and its reputation–ask for references;
- Contact the Florida Attorney General's Office at 1(866) 9NO-SCAM to see if there are complaints against a company or contractor;
- Check for proof of insurance and verify with the insurer that their policy is current;
- Check to see if the contractor is bonded and verify with the bonding agency;
- Never pay the full amount of a repair upfront and hesitate before providing large deposits;
- Read the entire contract, including the fine print, before signing to ensure it includes the required buyer's right to cancel language. Understand cancellation rights and penalties you may experience for canceling;
- Insist on releases of any liens that could be placed on the property from all subcontractors prior to making final payments. Homeowners may unknowingly have liens placed against their properties by suppliers or subcontractors who have not been paid by the contractor. If the contractor fails to pay them, the liens will remain on the title; and
- Do not sign a certificate of completion or make final payment until you are satisfied with the work performed.

Assignment of Benefits: Many contractors may ask you to complete an Assignment of Benefits which allows the homeowner who holds the insurance policy to sign over their insurance rights or benefits to the contractor or other third parties. The contractor or third party can then file an insurance claim, make repair decisions and collect on benefits without the homeowner's involvement. While AOBs can offer convenience to policyholders attempting to navigate the insurance claims process, unscrupulous individuals and companies may seek to take advantage of the power an AOB provides. If your home is damaged, keep the following in mind as you seek to make repairs:

- Be wary of any company that pressures you to sign or insists upon the use of an AOB in order to do repairs;
- Read the entire contract carefully to ensure you are not signing over your benefits without your full knowledge and consent;
- Do not sign an AOB if there are blank spaces in the document; and
- New laws effective July 1, 2019, allow AOBs to be rescinded within 14 days of execution of the AOB, or within 30 days after the scheduled work start date if the assignee has not begun substantial work. Or, if no start date is listed, a new AOB can be rescinded at least 30 days following the execution date if the assignee has not begun substantial work.

Tree Service Scams: Heavy winds from a hurricane or tropical storm results in littered roads and uprooted trees. If you plan to have nearby trees removed to protect your home from danger or have fallen trees removed after a storm, follow these tips to avoid being scammed:

- Watch out for anyone who approaches unsolicited about tree removal;
- Get multiple written estimates and ask whether debris removal is included in the estimate;
- Research the company and its reputation–ask for references. Contact the Florida Attorney General's Office at 1(866) 9NO-SCAM to check if there are complaints against the company;
- Check for proof of insurance and verify with the insurer that their policy is current; and
- Never pay the full amount up front and do not make a final payment until you are completely satisfied with the work done.

Charity Scams: This scam is particularly effective after a disaster, during which numerous disaster-specific charities pop up. If you would like to donate to help with disaster relief, consider these tips:

- Avoid solicitors that use high-pressure tactics or are hesitant to provide additional information on the charitable organization;
- Be wary of charities with similar sounding names. Some phony charities may attempt to capitalize on disasters by using names similar to legitimate, well-known charities;
- Consider donating to an established disaster-relief charity; and
- Contact the Florida Attorney General's Office or the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (1-800-HELP-FLA), the agency that regulates charities, to determine if the charity you are donating to has any complaints against them.

Disaster Relief Scams: The Federal Emergency Management Agency offers disaster relief to eligible victims through various programs. When seeking aid, consider the following:

- No state or federal disaster relief agency will call you for your financial information;
- State and federal workers carry identification and will not ask for or accept cash;
- Know that applications for federal FEMA relief programs are free and can be accessed at DisasterAssistance.gov or by calling 1(800) 621-FEMA; and
- Be wary of anyone who offers to fill out, assist with or expedite your application as they may be seeking access to your personal information.

Water Testing and Treatment Scams: Water mains and personal wells can be affected during hurricanes, and dishonest companies and individuals may insist upon pricey tests to determine water safety. Avoid falling victim by following these tips:

- If someone claims to be a representative of your city, county or utility provider needing to inspect your water line or well, ask for and verify proof of identification;
- Check for water safety alerts as provided by local media and utility providers;
- If you doubt the safety of your water, contact your local health department or utility. Local water utilities are required to test water quality on a regular basis;
- If you doubt the safety of your well water, seek advice from your state or local health department to determine what tests should be performed and find certified testers in your area; and
- If in doubt, boil water vigorously for one to three minutes or drink bottled water.

The state of emergency declared ahead of Hurricane Sally is still in effect and that means Florida's price gouging law still applies to anyone who sells essential commodities or provides essential services to our consumers. We anticipate an uptick in price gouging complaints and complaints about unscrupulous contractors and charities post-Sally, especially tree service scams, building and home repair scams, disaster relief scams, water remediation services and

water testing and treatment scams.

Please report any scams to the Florida Attorney General's Office by calling 1(866) 9NO-SCAM, visiting MyFloridaLegal.com or downloading the reporting app No Scam on your smartphone.