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Florida Attorney General's Office News Release

CONSUMER ALERT: AG Moody Warns Consumers to Watch for Coronavirus Scams



TALLAHASSEE, Fla.—Attorney General Ashley Moody is asking Floridians to be cautious when researching information about coronavirus COVID-19. A malicious website displaying a live map of COVID-19 cases mimicking a legitimate map by Johns Hopkins University was recently reported. Once unwitting users click on the website, a program is activated that can access and steal sensitive user data. It is suspected that the website is being spread across the internet via infected email attachments and online advertisements. Governor Ron DeSantis has issued an executive order placing Florida under a state of emergency. During this health emergency, Floridians may be targeted by scammers seeking to take advantage of general concerns about the spread of the virus to defraud individuals and businesses.

Attorney General Ashley Moody said, “Scammers will use any occasion to prey on the emotions of unsuspecting consumers, and fear is a favorite tool of criminals trying to commit fraud. Please exercise caution when searching the internet for COVID-19 information and do not click on suspicious links or attachments.”

Below is a screenshot of the fake Johns Hopkins website:



***Figure 1**. Screenshot of the malicious website "Corona-Virus-Map[dot]com" pretending to be a legitimate COVID-19 tracker.*

Scammers are also sending phishing emails that appear to come from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or World Health Organization—asking for sensitive information or instructing people to click on suspicious links and open malicious attachments. Be alert for these scams and verify the email sender by checking the email address or contacting the CDC or WHO directly.

As Florida has seen in the wake of significant storms and events in the past, fraudsters will also seek to profit from the goodwill of Floridians by posing as charitable organizations. These illegitimate charities or organizations may claim to help those locally, nationally, or internationally affected by the COVID-19. However, in reality, they are diverting the well-intended donations of Florida citizens for personal gain. Be sure to thoroughly research any organization claiming to aid in the prevention, medical care, or recovery costs associated with COVID-19.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, scammers are setting up websites to sell bogus products to protect against the virus, and using fake emails, texts and social media posts as a trick to steal money and personal information. Ignore online offers for vaccinations as there are currently no vaccines available to prevent COVID-19.

The following are more tips to avoid COVID-19-related scams:

- - If malware is suspected, do not shop online, access online banking or do other activities that involve sensitive information like usernames, passwords, or account information until it has been checked out;
  - If malware or other issues are suspected, seek technical support from a trusted provider;
  - Install and update security software regularly;
  - Know that online searches may not be the best way to seek tech support. Tech support scammers may pay to boost rankings in online search results. Instead, seek personal recommendations or consider visiting an electronics store for assistance;
  - Only buy products from reputable stores and websites;

- Be sure online stores have working contact information. Before offering up personal information, make sure the store has a real street address and working customer service number;
- Research product claims. Evaluate claims of any medical product before buying, and watch out for products claiming to offer a miracle cure for a range of ailments;
- Check with medical professionals before purchasing an unproven health product; and
- Research before donating. Search for the charity's name online, using the words scam or complaint, and check resources for information about the charity, such as Charity Navigator and the Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance at 1(703) 247-9321.

Additionally, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration offers tips on avoiding health fraud scams. For more information, click here.

To learn more about COVID-19, click here.

Anyone who suspects a scam or believes a product is being falsely marketed as protection against the virus should contact the Attorney General's Office at 1(866) 9NO-SCAM or by visiting MyFloridaLegal.com.

The Attorney General also encourages consumers suspicious of price gouging to report it by calling 1(866) 9NO-SCAM or by visiting MyFloridaLegal.com. Price gouging can also be reported to the Attorney General's Office by downloading the free NO SCAM app in the Android or Apple app store. For tips on reporting price gouging, click here. For a list of the commodities covered under the state's price gouging laws during the COVID-19 state of emergency, click here.

Floridians can also contact the Florida Department of Health's 24/7 Call Center at 1(866) 779-6121 or email COVID-19@FLHealth.gov for additional health questions related to the virus.

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The Florida Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division issues Consumer Alerts to inform Floridians of emerging scams, new methods used to commit fraud, increased reports of common scams, or any other deceptive practice. Consumer Alerts are designed to notify Floridians about scams and available refunds in an effort to prevent financial losses or other harm caused by deceptive practices. Anyone encountering a scam should report the incident to the Florida Attorney General's Office by calling 1(866) 9NO-SCAM or visiting MyFloridaLegal.com.To view recent Consumer Alerts and for other information about avoiding scams, visit MyFloridaLegal.com/ConsumerAlert.