



## Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

Your Residential Utility Consumer Advocate

# CONSUMERS' FACT SHEET

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# HOW TO AVOID UTILITY SCAMS AND FRAUD

Scams targeting consumers are a widespread problem. There are hundreds of known scams, and new scams emerge often. The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), your residential utility consumer advocate, has developed this fact sheet to help you avoid common utility scams.

## What is a scam?

A scam is a fraudulent attempt to get people to give away their personal information or give money to a fraudulent individual or company. Consumers become victims of scams when they buy or pay for fraudulent products or services.

The Ohio Attorney General's Office is the agency that protects Ohioans from fraudulent activity, like scams. Refer to the Attorney General's website, [www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov](http://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov), for the latest information about scams affecting Ohioans. You can also learn about know scams from the Federal Trade Commission's website, [www.consumer.ftc.gov](http://www.consumer.ftc.gov), or your utility companies' website.

## Common scam tactics

Utility scammers often use high pressure tactics to deceive consumers. Scammers often call and demand an immediate payment, seek access to your home or personal information by pretending to be from your utility, threaten disconnection for not making

an immediate payment, or make false claims of special government programs to help pay utility bills.

**Threats of disconnection.** Scammers may threaten to disconnect your utility service if you do not make an immediate payment. Utilities are required to provide prior notice well before the date in which services can be disconnected for non-payment. Be aware that utilities never require their customers to make immediate payments using prepaid cards or gift cards, and utilities do not request personal information to make a payment. If you are told your account is past due, you should check your account's status online or by calling your utility's customer service line.

**Caller ID spoofing.** Scammers can use "spoofing" technology to change the text or phone number that appears on your caller ID to look like a trusted source, such as your utility. If you are suspicious about the call, hang up. Do not redial the suspicious number. Call your utility from the number found on your bill or in the phone book.

**Door-to-door.** There have been reports of scammers portraying themselves as representatives of the utility or as suppliers of gas or electric service. Check the credentials of anyone who seeks to enter your home, always ask to see a picture ID, and be cautious in sharing any personal information including utility bills.

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The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts.

The state agency also educates consumers about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues.

For more information, please visit the OCC website at [www.occ.ohio.gov](http://www.occ.ohio.gov).



*The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel is an equal opportunity employer and provider of services.*

### Avoid being scammed

Defending your personal information is essential to avoid being scammed. There are other steps you can take to avoid fraudulent activity. Look out for common tactics, and adhere to these best practices to avoid utility scams.

#### Protect your personal information.

Utilities will not contact you to get your personal information. Always be cautious about sharing sensitive information like account numbers, credit cards, Social Security numbers, and your phone number.

**Ask for credentials.** Ask for their name, their company, and a picture ID. Don't let the person into your residence until and unless proper credentials are provided.

**Be cautious of calling unfamiliar toll-free numbers.** Hang-up on any caller that asks you to press a number or dial a toll-free phone number. Additionally, use discretion when sharing account or personal information with callers who have called you.

### Report scams

If you are contacted by someone and you suspect it is fraudulent, contact your local law enforcement. The Attorney General's Office is also a resource who might be able to help address utility scams. Contact their office at 1-800-282-0515, or complete an online complaint form at their website, [www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov](http://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov). Forms are available to print and mail in on their website. Send complaints to the Attorney General's Office.

#### Consumer Protection Section

30 E. Broad St., 14th Floor  
Columbus, Ohio 43215

You can also direct questions and complaints about utility services including scams to the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio. You can file an informal complaint with the PUCO's online complaint form at [www.puco.ohio.gov](http://www.puco.ohio.gov). You can also contact the PUCO with questions or complaints toll free at 1-800-686-7826 or write to them.

#### ATTN: IAD

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Two federal agencies will also accept complaints regarding telephone scams. Contact the FTC to file a complaint against a telemarketer or about a telecommunications issue at 1-877-382-4357. With the FTC, you can also register a phone number for the Do-Not-Call registry or verify if your phone number is registered. You can also contact the Federal Communications Commission to file a complaint against a telemarketer or about a telecommunications issue at 1-888-225-5322.

The FTC found that more than 25 million American consumers were victims of scams in 2011, many of whom were victims of utility scams. By looking out for common scam tactics and using the best practices recommended in this fact sheet, you can avoid being a victim of fraudulent activity. The OCC has more information about consumer protections and common scams on its website, [www.occ.ohio.gov](http://www.occ.ohio.gov).