

# Utilities Raise Awareness About Scams

*Don't fall victim to scammers, who come up with new tactics every day to try to take advantage of consumers*

By Tracy Warren

When a scammer called Florida pet clinic operator Cindy Evers last year and demanded immediate payment on an overdue electric bill, it sounded real.

"They knew my account number and gave me a figure that I owed that's close to what I usually pay on my electric bill," Cindy says.

She paid, even though—in the back of her mind—she knew her payment was not late.

"I have pets under sedation, and I'm taking care of animals," Cindy says. "I think I just panicked, thinking they were going to shut my electricity off. I did what they told me to do."

The call was a scam. Cindy lost \$900.

She is not the only person to have been victimized. The scam that duped Cindy has been plaguing utility consumers across North America for several years, robbing them of millions.

Now, utilities are fighting back.

More than 80 utilities and energy industry organizations from across the United States and Canada joined forces to recognize the first-ever North American Utilities United Against Scams Day on November 16, 2016.

Electric cooperatives have increased their communication efforts, sending information directly to members and encouraging local TV stations and newspapers to warn citizens about the scam, how it works and what people should do and not do if they are targeted.

Even the wariest consumers can be duped. Scammers develop new tactics every day.

The "past due" scam—similar to the one Cindy experienced—goes something like this: A customer gets a call from an 800-number that looks like a valid utility company phone number.

Widely available spoofing software allows crooks to display what appears to

## Tips to Protect Yourself

- ▶ Do not assume the name and number on your caller ID are legitimate. Caller IDs can be spoofed.
- ▶ Never share your personal information, including date of birth, Social Security number or banking account information.
- ▶ Never wire money to someone you do not know.
- ▶ Do not click links or call numbers in unexpected emails or texts—especially those asking for your account information.
- ▶ Most utilities will NOT require their customers to buy prepaid debit cards or money orders to avoid an immediate disconnection. ■

be an official number on caller ID.

The caller threatens to cut off power if the customer does not pay.

But here is the giveaway: The crook will demand payment via a prepaid debit card or money order, and will ask for it within a specified time frame—often an hour or less.

The scammer may even quote an amount that sounds like your typical monthly bill. That way, the threat has more credibility.

Scammers might direct the customer to a specific store nearby that sells the prepaid cards and instruct the customer to put money on the card and provide the card number to the scammer.

Some scammers have even been bold enough to contact potential victims in person, coming to the member's house.

If you receive a call that sounds like it may be a scam, or if you believe the call is a scam, hang up, call the police and report the incident to your local utility. ■

# Scam Alert



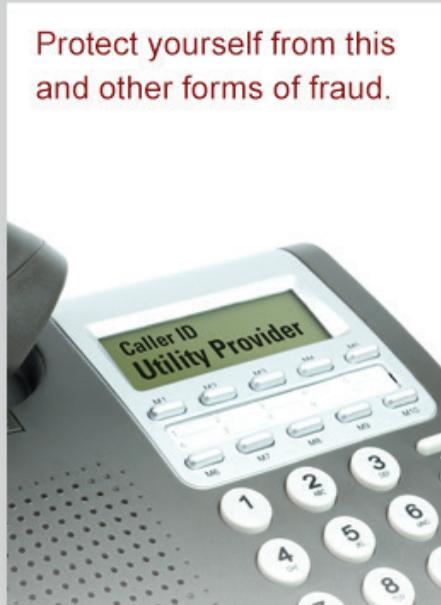
**We want you to be aware of a growing phone scam that is targeting utility customers.**

Phone scammers posing as your utility provider call and insist you are delinquent on your bill. They may also threaten to turn off your power, rig caller ID to make it look like the call is from your utility provider or tell you to put the money on a prepaid debit card and ask for the card number. Don't believe it.

DO NOT pay over the phone if immediate payment is demanded to avoid a disconnection. Here's what to do if the call seems suspicious:

- 1 Hang up.
- 2 Call your utility provider at the phone number on your bill.
- 3 Call the police.

Protect yourself from this and other forms of fraud.



## How You Can Help Thwart Scammers

Awareness is the first step to preventing you or someone you know from becoming a victim of scammers.

Here are two ways you can help spread the word:

- ▶ Alert your family members and friends. Share the scammers' tactics described in this article and any other tactics you have heard about.
- ▶ Warn even those you do not know by reposting scam awareness information on social media. Use the hashtag #stopscams. ■