

# The Star-Ledger

## **N.J. businesses hit with 80 warning letters for price gouging during coronavirus crisis**

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published March 17, 2020

New Jersey is issuing 13 subpoenas and sending more than 80 warning letters to businesses suspected of illegally raising prices amid the coronavirus pandemic, the state attorney general's office announced Tuesday.

"We are taking an all-hands-on-deck approach to consumer complaints about price gouging and other abuses," state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a statement.

Protecting residents from businesses "who seek to prey on them financially" was the top priority, said Paul Rodríguez, acting director of the Division of Consumer Affairs.

The department has received 619 complaints so far, more than double the total less than a week ago.

Most have rolled in since March 4, officials said, days before the governor declared a state of emergency. Sellers may not raise their prices more than 10% during an emergency, and face fines up to \$10,000 the first time they do.

The spread of COVID-19 has led consumers to empty shelves around the state, and residents reported that masks, hand sanitizer, food, water and other in-demand items were unfairly marked up. The hundreds of complaints represented a "much smaller number of identifiable businesses," authorities said, but none were named.

Investigators have finished at least 159 inspections, according to a news release. The 13 subpoenas demanded additional information from some companies.

Officials also warned residents about scams.

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention employees are not knocking on doors, nor are they calling to ask for donations for quarantined animals, officials said.

"Don't fall for fake cures," authorities added in a news release. "No cure or preventative medicine has been approved for sale."

Last week, a 7-Eleven owner was charged with child endangerment for selling a homemade spray sanitizer that burned four boys.

Officials asked residents to call 973-504-6240 to report price gouging, or to fill out an online form.

At least 267 people have tested positive for the virus in New Jersey.