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Beware of scammers who say you must register for stimulus money, N.J. attorney general says

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Coronavirus fears are creating new ways for scammers to exploit residents, New Jersey officials say, especially when it comes to the \$2 trillion in stimulus funds Congress is pumping into the economy.

Although money from the federal government should automatically arrive for many taxpayers, scammers are telling residents they need to register for that assistance as a way to steal personal information, authorities said.

“New Jersey residents need the financial relief that’s coming to them,” state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a statement issued Friday. “We want you to be able to spot a scam, so that the check you’re expecting from the government doesn’t turn into a blank check from you to a thief.”

Nationwide, people have already lost almost \$12 million due to a variety of COVID-19 fraud, according to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission. The agency has logged more than 15,000 complaints, including hundreds from New Jersey.

Residents have also reported messages purporting to be from the U.S. Small Business Association, according to Grewal’s office. The government isn’t going to call you to ask for your Social Security number in order to receive help, officials stressed, and residents should never click on links in unsolicited emails.

If you receive a message supposedly from a government agency, look up that agency’s phone number to call and verify it, authorities said. Thieves are texting and emailing with fake links to trick residents into surrendering credit card numbers.

“Scammers are following news headlines to craft official-looking communications to convince consumers to grant them access to personal information, putting them at risk for identity theft,” Paul Rodríguez, acting consumer affairs director, said in a statement.

People should also be wary of messages from “relatives” begging for money (residents should first call that relative to see if they’re ok), “charities” demanding donations (always research them on sites like Guidestar) or “travel insurance companies” promoting coronavirus-related refunds (New Jersey’s consumer affairs office published refund advice online).

Complaints can be filed with the state. Victims of coronavirus-related fraud can call the National Center for Disaster Fraud’s hotline at 866-720-5721.

Reporting scams helps investigators zero in on the worst criminals, an FBI agent stressed last month.

Grewal's office previously joined a task force with other state and federal officials to investigate COVID-19 fraud.