



Don't be a victim of a rental property scam

An online classified advertisement featuring a great apartment for a "too good to be true" price may not be the perfect match after all.

Indiana Attorney General Greg Zoeller warns consumers that scammers are using free classified websites to prey on those looking for an apartment or landlords looking for renters.

Here's an example of how the rental property scam works: You start emailing with the "owner" of an apartment or house that you would like to rent and the person says the place is yours if you wire money to cover an application fee or security deposit. You wire the money, and then never hear from the "owner" again.

How does this happen? Scammers hijack legitimate listings, change the contact information and then list the modified ads on another site; or they make up listings for places that aren't for rent or don't exist.

If you are an owner with an online ad for an apartment, a "renter" may contact you by email and then send you a check for a deposit. Later the "renter" tells you they want to cancel and needs you to wire the money back. Unfortunately, victims wire the money before noticing the scammer's check was a fake.

Scammers prefer to use wire transfer companies like Western Union and MoneyGram because it's like sending cash and they get the money quickly. Typically, there's no way to reverse a transfer or trace the money, and money wired to another country can be picked up at multiple locations, so it's almost impossible to identify or track someone down. To help ensure Western Union isn't used as a conduit for fraud, they too have released consumer alerts including warnings about the rental property scam. The Attorney General's Office and the financial services provider offer the following tips for apartment seekers and owners:

- If the rental price sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Research average rental rates for similar properties in the area.
- If you're communicating by email, check for common red flags like poor grammar, misspellings, character/spacing mistakes, and excessive capitalization.
- Most renters want to see the property before they commit; if they don't, chances are you're dealing with a scammer. Another red flag is if they have an unusually strong sense of urgency to get you to rent or rent your property to them very early in communications with them.
- Be cautious when dealing with people who say they currently live overseas or are out of the country on business. Scammers tell victims this to explain why they can't meet in person. Be cautious also if they prefer to communicate via e-mail only.
- Don't send money to anyone you don't know and trust.
- Never agree to deposit a check from someone you don't know and then wire money back. Remember you are responsible for the checks you deposit, so if a check turns out to be a fake, you owe the bank the money you withdrew.