

# WARNING: WINTER STORM SCAMS

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The recent parade of winter storms has led to new scams aimed at taking advantage of people whose homes have been damaged by flood waters, ice and snow.

Weather emergencies can mean big bucks for scammers and unlicensed contractors, according to a new warning issued by the Federal Trade Commission (“FTC”). These new scams, according to the FTC, are used to profit from others’ misery caused by severe winter weather. Here are tips to help avoid becoming a victim:

**Watch out for Utility Imposters.** Utility imposters work year-round but are particularly opportunistic during or after a storm when they might call or knock on your door claiming they need to repair or replace damaged equipment. Then they will ask you to pay for these repairs. Do not pay them. They might also appear right after a storm and offer to get your power back on, but if you pay them, they will take your money and disappear and/or charge you for things you don’t need.

**Hire only contractors who are licensed and insured.** Check with your state or county government to confirm a contractor’s license to do the work they say they will do. Ask the contractor for proof of insurance, as well as a written contract that sets forth the terms of the work they will perform, the time it will take to complete it, their fee for labor, materials and equipment, when payment is due, etc.

**Never pay in cash or for the entire job upfront before work is performed.**

Only pay in full after the work is completed and you are satisfied with it. Paying by credit card, whenever possible, offers some protection. While not a perfect solution, your credit card company may have fraud protection services.

**Other weather-related scams.**

Other scams to look out for include rental listing scams. If your home has been damaged and you’re looking for a temporary place to live, steer clear of people who tell you to wire money or ask for security deposits before you’ve met or signed a lease. Other scammers hijack on-line rental or real estate listings by changing the contact e-mail address or make up listings for places that are not for rent or don’t exist.

There are also scams, in which people looking for honest work after a storm are tricked by scammers who advertise using the same mediums that real employers and job placement firms do. They lie about your chances of getting a job and often ask for a fee before you get one.

**What to do.** If you suspect you have been targeted by a weather-related or other type of scam, immediately report it to the FTC through its website ([reportfraud.ftc.gov](http://reportfraud.ftc.gov)). Also, do not hesitate to contact your legal services plan’s panel law firm to speak with an attorney.

