

HURRICANE RELIEF – SCAMS COME AFTER FLOODS

Since Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas last week and flooded the Texas coastal areas, my own work email flooded with warnings from various consumer protection and law enforcement agencies about the high potential for phony disaster assistance schemes. You can pretty much guarantee this kind of fraud will make an appearance after every major natural disaster.

We are especially warned about unsolicited emails displaying subject lines, hyperlinks, or attachments related to the hurricane. Rather than providing the reader who opens these links with information on disaster relief, these emails likely only serve as a means to infect your computer with malware.

Some of the same kind of trust issues surface with charity messages appearing in social media posts. Such appeals deserve a lot of research and scrutiny before committing any support to them.

How prevalent is disaster fraud? Some statistics from the FBI give us an idea. Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana in 2005. A fraud task force set up by the FBI to investigate disaster fraud recorded 36,000 complaints from 2005 to 2009. Those investigations resulted in 1300 people getting indicted for crimes related to the hurricane relief. So it seems like this event carries the potential to attract a lot of crooks into this mix.

The FBI offers some suggestions to anyone considering a donation. And these suggestions really apply to any kind of charitable giving, not just disaster relief:

- Only donate to charities you know and trust
- Don't assume charity appeals on social media are legitimate. Assume the opposite, and do your research before making any commitment
- Avoid cash donations if at all possible. Make payments through credit cards or by writing a check, and never write a check to an individual, only directly pay the charity
- Don't donate through a money transfer service like Western Union or Moneygram. Legitimate charities don't handle money that way.
- Never open a link or attachment in an unsolicited email. You risk downloading malware and viruses

From what I am reading and seeing, the need for disaster relief in Texas will be around for some time, so take some time to research your giving options. Giving in haste is something crooks count on to avoid detection.

GOOGLE REVIEW SCAM?

Richard Pederson of Richard's Auto Repair in Clinton brought something new to my attention last week. If search Google for Mr. Pederson's auto shop, you will see a side box showing the shop's address, phone number, hours of operation, and a map to find the place. And you will see a rating of one to five stars, called the Google Review. In his four decades of operation, three people submitted reviews to Google, two of them negative. Richard disputes the validity of the negative reviews, but that is not what he complained to me about.

He reported receiving a phone call from someone claiming "I am affiliated with Google", who guaranteed Richard's Auto Repair a five-star rating, provided the shop paid this caller \$195 a month. The caller claimed the ability to remove all reviews of less than five stars. Richard didn't go for this offer, smelling a rat.

When he told me about it, I smelled the same thing. I researched this some, and found their companies who advertise they can improve your rating, and Google offers a process of disputing certain types of reviews, but I didn't see anything about guarantees.

If you run a small business, this is something you might be on the lookout for. Don't let yourself get bullied or pushed into some service you don't need, or that does not even exist.

CONTACT SENIORS VS. CRIME

Let me know about scams, fraud, or other crookedness you run across. Most of what I learn, I learn from you. Contact me at Seniors vs. Crime, Clinton County Sheriff's Office, 563-242-9211 extension 4433, or email me at randymeier@gapa911.us

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