

Veterans: Beware of Scams that Target You!

Veterans who have proudly served our country are constant targets for con artists. Swindlers target vets because they know they receive guaranteed benefits. Here are just a few examples of recent scams.

Bogus sales – A scammer claiming to be a deploying service member posts a large ticket item on a classified ad website that's/ he needs to sell right away and at a steep discount. The scammer asks for upfront payment with a wire transfer or gift cards. The item is never delivered.

Real estate rip-off – A scammer posts a fake rental property on a classified ad website offering military discounts. You just need to wire a security deposit to the landlord. The rental property doesn't exist.

VA phishing – A caller claiming to be from "Veteran Affairs" calls to "update" your file. Identity thieves use personal info (e.g. social security number, date of birth) to steal money, credit or benefits.

Fake charities – Fake charities use names that are similar to the names of legitimate charities (that benefit veterans, military members or their families) to steal well-intended donations.

Benefit buyouts and pension advances – Scammers target veterans who are in financial crises with offers of cash in exchange for the vet's future disability or pension payments. While the buyouts seem large, they typically represent a fraction of the value of the benefit. Similarly, they may offer to buy some of the vet's monthly pension payments for a lump-sum "advance." The advance is, in fact, a high interest loan that exceeds state limits.

Dubious investment advice – Unscrupulous investment advisers tell veterans that they are missing out on "Aid and Attendance" benefits and recommend moving assets to trust or insurance products to qualify. Doing so, however, could result in the veteran losing eligibility for Medicaid services or the use of their money for a long time. Adding insult to injury, the advisers charge hundreds to thousands of dollars in fees for their services.

The best way to protect yourself against scams?

- Don't respond to mail, email and phone solicitations;
- Check out charities with the Maryland Secretary of State: www.sos.state.md.us. When making donations, give directly to the organization. Fundraisers keep the majority of money they collect;
- Don't pay anyone you don't know by wire transfer or gift cards. These types of payments are like sending cash – once sent, the money is gone. Reputable companies don't ask for money this way;
- The VA will never call, text or e-mail you to update your information. Work only with VA-accredited representatives. To find one, visit the VA's website: www.va.gov/ogc/apps/accreditation/index.asp.
- The FTC also provides tips on money management and avoiding scams at: www.militaryconsumer.gov.

To get more information about this and other consumer issues or to obtain this factsheet in an alternative format, contact the Office of Consumer Protection at consumer@howardcountymd.gov, 410-313-6420 (voice/relay) or at visit our website at: www.howardcountymd.gov/consumer.