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CONSUMER INFORMATION
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Lights out for fake utility bill collectors

May 9, 2014

by Lisa Lake

Consumer Education Specialist, FTC

The caller sounds convincing: If you don't pay your utility bills immediately, your gas, electricity or water will be shut off. They ask you to pay using a specific — and unusual — method.

Be warned: The call probably is a trick to steal your money.

The Federal Trade Commission, state and local consumer protection agencies, and utility companies have gotten a slew of complaints from consumers about utility bill scams. Here are a few signs you may be dealing with a scammer:

- **You get a call or an email claiming your services will be cut off** unless you call a number or click on a link and give your account information. Most utility companies don't ask you to send your account information by email.
- **Someone calls demanding you wire the money or use a prepaid or reloadable debit or gift card to pay your bill.** Legitimate companies don't demand you use those methods to pay.
- **The caller tells you to call a phone number and give your credit, debit or prepaid card number.** But if you do that, the scammer can access the money from your credit, debit or prepaid card, and you can't trace where your money went. Once it's gone, it's gone.

So if you get a call from someone threatening to shut off your utility service:

- **Make sure you're dealing with your utility company before you pay any amount.** Call the company using a number you've looked up. Or go to their website to determine the status of your account. Confirm where and how to pay your bill. Don't give out your account information on the phone unless you place or expect the call.
- **Never wire money to someone you don't know** — regardless of the situation. Once you wire money, you cannot get it back.
- **Do not click links or call numbers that appear in unexpected emails or**

texts — especially those asking for your account information. If you click on a link, your computer could become infected with malware, including viruses that can steal your information and ruin your computer.

- **If you are falling behind on your utility bill, contact the utility company and see if they can work with you to come up with a payment plan** and a way to keep your service on.
- If you think a fake utility bill collector or any other scammer has contacted you, **file a complaint with the FTC and your state consumer protection agency.**

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