

Summer 2017

Consumer and Environmental Protection Unit (CEPU)

### In This Issue

If you believe you have been the victim of a property rental scam, or any other scam, the Office of the San Diego City Attorney wants to help you.

- **Wire Fraud Statute**  
18 U.S. Code § 1343
- **Resources**  
**Federal Trade Commission**  
**600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW**  
**Washington, DC 20580**  
[www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov](http://www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov)

### Contact Us

Office of the San Diego City Attorney, Consumer and Environmental Protection Unit  
1200 Third Avenue, Suite 700  
San Diego, CA 92101-4103  
619-533-5500  
[www.sandiego.gov/cityattorney](http://www.sandiego.gov/cityattorney)  
[cityattorney@sandiego.gov](mailto:cityattorney@sandiego.gov)

### File a Complaint with Us

Call our hotline

- (619) 533-5600
- 9:00am to 5:00pm
- Monday through Friday

Fill out the complaint form

- [www.sandiego.gov/cityattorney/divisions/communityjustice/cepu](http://www.sandiego.gov/cityattorney/divisions/communityjustice/cepu)
- Mail the form, or
- E-mail the form

### PROPERTY RENTAL SCAMS

With the weather heating up and the summer here, scammers are gearing up to prey on consumers looking to book the perfect vacation home in San Diego. Scammers know how difficult it is for consumers to find the right vacation rental at a bargain price, and they also know how excited and eager consumers are to book a great deal as soon as possible. So before you book your next rental, here are a few things you need to know to avoid being scammed.

### HOW PROPERTY RENTAL SCAMS WORK



Scammers post fraudulent listings on many reputable vacation rental websites, such as Trulia and Craigslist. Typically, these posts include beautiful vacation rental properties at a surprisingly low cost. To appear authentic, some scammers use legitimate listing ads and simply change the price and contact

information. Other scammers use photographs of properties that are not for rent or do not exist in San Diego at all.

Once a renter is enticed with a seemingly great deal, the scammer will pressure the renter into paying an immediate deposit. The scammer will require the renter to pay the deposit through a money order or wire transfer. The scammer will come up with an excuse as to why he cannot meet with the renter in person or show the renter the property before booking. For instance, the scammer will tell the renter he is out of town for business or attending to a family emergency in a different county. The scammer will promise the renter to send keys to the property as soon as the payment is made, and may even promise to refund the deposit if the renter is unhappy with the property.

Finally, to seal the deal, the scammer may add extra desirable amenities to make it more difficult for the renter to turn away. But, as soon as the payment is made, the renter has lost his money and he will never hear from the "landlord" again.

## Agency Reference Sheet

Consult the reference sheet for list of agencies that investigate consumer complaints

## HOW TO AVOID BEING A VICTIM OF THIS SCAM

Here are a few things you can do to protect yourself from a potential property scam:

### **Be suspicious of any rental ads that seem “too good to be true.”**

If a deal looks “too good to be true,” it most likely is. Scammers know how difficult it is for consumers to pass up a good deal, especially when it comes to summer vacation rentals in San Diego. To ensure their ads receive as much attention as possible, they will advertise a beautiful vacation home with extra desirable amenities, and drop the rental price to an amount significantly lower than the average rental rate in that area. If you come across any ad that fits this description, report it and keep searching!

### **Research the landlord’s email address.**

It is common for a scammer to use the same email address to conduct different scams online. Conduct a search of the “landlords” email address to check whether any victims have written reports about this individual.

### **Research the address of the property.**

Legitimate landlords will use various credible rental websites to post ads of their rental properties. Conduct a search of the property address to check whether it is actually up for rent. If it is, compare the contact information on each ad to determine whether the “landlord” is the appropriate party to contact for rental information.

### **Be suspicious of any ads or email correspondence with landlords that include misspelled words or poor grammar.**

Legitimate property management firms seldom misspell words or use poor grammar in their ads or email correspondences. A legitimate landlord pays attention to detail, while a scammer is more concerned with making a deal as soon as possible.

### **Be wary of landlords that are unable to meet with you in person, show you the property, or may only be contacted via email.**

If a landlord cannot meet with you in person or show you the property before booking the property, you are likely dealing with a scammer. Legitimate landlords are interested in meeting you and are willing to show the property before booking it. Be careful with “landlords” who are unavailable to meet and may only be contacted via email, as these are sure signs that you are dealing with a scammer.

### **Be cautious of landlords that only accept payments in the form of money orders or wire transfers.**

Scammers want your money and they want it fast. If a “landlord” is pressuring you to send a deposit through money order or wire transfer without giving you the opportunity to see the property or meet with you in person, you are likely dealing with a scammer. Be especially cautious if the landlord requires you to send the deposit to a non-local or foreign address.

**Request to see other non-posted pictures of the property.**

It is unlikely that a scammer will be able to send you additional, non-posted pictures of the property. Be sure to ask the "landlord" for more pictures, especially if the ad does not include any pictures of the inside of the property.

**Be wary of landlords that are too pushy and pressuring you to make a payment.**

Vacation rentals in San Diego are in high demand during the summer. A legitimate landlord is unlikely to pressure a renter into paying an immediate deposit, especially without any information as to who the renter is. If the "landlord" is pressuring you to make quick decisions, you are likely dealing with a scammer.

**Be cautious about sending your personal information via email.**

Be suspicious of a "landlord" that asks you for your social security number, bank account information, or credit card information via email. Although not required by law, a legitimate landlord will require a renter to submit a rental application through a credible site. You should also be suspicious if the "landlord" is willing to rent property to you without any information at all.

Please visit the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) for additional information.

**The Role of CEPU in San Diego**



The Unit is dedicated to investigating citizen complaints and prosecuting criminal and civil violations of California's unfair competition and other consumer laws committed in the City of San Diego.

**Written by Stephanie Cubias**

The information provided in this newsletter is intended to convey general information and is not intended to be relied upon as legal advice

The San Diego City Attorney's office cannot provide legal advice to private parties.