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Prosecutors Join Forces to Protect County Residents During COVID-19 Public Health Crisis

Residents urged to report hate crimes, illegal price gouging, and scams

Local law enforcement agencies are working together to protect San Diego County residents and to remind the public of consumer laws in place during the COVID-19 state of emergency and Governor Gavin Newsom's order for Californians to stay at home. During this time of uncertainty, San Diego City Attorney Mara W. Elliott, San Diego County District Attorney Summer Stephan, and U.S. Attorney Robert Brewer are collaborating to hold accountable those who prey on fear and vulnerabilities for personal gain by:

- hiking prices on essential items
- duping customers through false advertising
- committing acts of discrimination that could lead to hate crimes

In response to reports about discrimination and harassment against Asian Americans and immigrant populations, the agencies are sharing information regarding incidents of potential hate crimes and are warning the public not to engage in discriminatory behavior.

The offices are also working together on investigating reports of price gouging on items such as food, hand sanitizer, and protective masks. Additionally, the agencies are cracking down on scams involving false promises of treatments and cures, fraudulent financial investments, fake at-home testing kits, and deceptive online ads and email campaigns.

“Collaboration in government and law enforcement has never been more important,” City Attorney Mara Elliott said. **“We are working together with all levels of government to target and hold accountable those who spread hatred and exploit residents while our community grapples with these difficult circumstances.”**

Reports of predatory pricing, usually by small retailers looking to make a fast buck, are coming in from across the county. One store tripled the price of eggs. Another medical supply establishment is charging five times the former price for hand sanitizer and twice the price for a box of surgical masks. Another shop owner is re-selling Costco-brand bottled water for four times the retail price.

State law makes it a crime to raise prices more than 10% on necessary goods and services after a state of emergency has been declared. It is also a crime to make untrue or misleading statements about a product, such as claiming a product can treat or cure COVID-19.

“We rely on reports from San Diegans across the county to stop greedy price gouging, fraudulent schemes

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and discrimination as a potential genesis for hate crimes,” District Attorney Summer Stephan said. “We will stop crooks who prey on the natural fears and vulnerabilities that our community is experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We want the public to know that we stand with them and will continue to bring justice during this vulnerable time. We are working in partnership with public safety leaders to investigate reports and act swiftly to halt illegal practices. So far, the incidents reported to our office have resulted in immediate compliance by businesses that our investigators have contacted.”

In addition, the United States Attorney’s Office and a range of federal law enforcement agencies are joining forces to address fraud relating to COVID-19. Individuals or companies who try to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to defraud consumers, patients, investors, businesses, or government face significant criminal penalties under a range of federal criminal laws, such as laws prohibiting wire fraud, mail fraud, or identity theft. The reach of federal law enforcement extends throughout the United States and beyond, and the U.S. Attorney’s Office is committed to protecting the residents of San Diego and Imperial counties.

U.S. Attorney Robert Brewer of the Southern District of California said, “We will not tolerate fraudsters who try to take advantage of the current pandemic to cheat and steal. The U.S. Attorney’s Office looks forward to federal, state, and local authorities working together to safeguard our community.”

The agencies are investigating all reports of price gouging and fraud to protect consumers who are trying to ensure the health and safety of their families. The offices are sharing information statewide with partners in federal, state, and local agencies to provide a coordinated response.

The Federal Trade Commission has a list of tips on ways to avoid Coronavirus scams, especially for the elderly, who are particularly vulnerable to scam phone calls. Part of their list includes:

- Hang up on robocalls without pressing any numbers. Scammers are using illegal robocalls to pitch everything from scam Coronavirus treatments to work-at-home schemes.
- Fact-check information. Scammers, and sometimes well-meaning people, share information that hasn’t been verified. Before you pass on any messages, contact trusted sources.
- Know who you’re buying from. Online sellers may claim to have in-demand products, like cleaning, household, and health and medical supplies when, in fact, they don’t.

See the full list here: <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/features/coronavirus-scams-what-ftc-doing>

Price gouging and predatory business practices can be reported to the following agencies:

- the Affirmative Civil Enforcement Unit of the City Attorney’s Office, at (619) 533-5618 or online at <https://www.sandiego.gov/cityattorney/divisions/civillitigation/civilprosecution>
- the District Attorney’s Consumer Protection Unit at (619) 531-3507
- National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) hotline (1-866-720-5721) or to the NCDF e-mail address disaster@leo.gov.

To report a hate crime, contact the San Diego Police Department at 619-531-2000 or 858-484-3154 or the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department at (858) 565-5200. For emergencies, call 9-1-1.