

Ohio Attorney General's  
**Consumer Advocate Newsletter**  
Keeping Consumers Safe and Informed



**February 2021**

**Ohio Attorney General Launches Animated Scam Video Series**



Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost has launched a new multi-media outreach initiative to increase Ohioans' awareness of COVID-19 scams, identity theft and red flags of scams.

"While Ohioans continue to be targeted by scammers, we are using new methods to help them learn how these scams operate, the red flags of a scam and how the Ohio Attorney General's Office can help" said Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost.

To ensure more Ohio consumers know about scams and how the Attorney General's Office can be a resource, the Ohio Attorney General's Office created the new animated videos. The videos can be viewed [here](#).

The episodes feature a fictional family, the Clarks, and cover the topic of identity theft, gift cards – which are often used as a payment method by scam artists – and how to spot a scam by knowing the red flags.

A few of the red flags highlighted in the animated series include:

- You're asked to wire money or send a prepaid money or gift card to a stranger.
- You're pressured to "act now!"
- Your personal information is requested.

Tips to stay safe during COVID-19 include:

- If you receive a call and don't recognize the number, don't answer! Let the caller leave a message and research what is said to see if it's legitimate.
- Know that scammers can "spoof" caller ID by pretending to call from your area code or another trusted-looking number. For example, they can make it seem as if they are calling from the CDC or a similar organization. Many scammers pretend to be IRS, Social Security or other government officials.
- Watch out for emails claiming to be from expert sources with special advice or info about COVID-19. Legitimate information is available for free at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and [www.coronavirus.ohio.gov](http://www.coronavirus.ohio.gov).
- Ignore advertisements promoting cures for the coronavirus.
- Research nonprofit organizations and crowdfunding campaigns before donating. Be cautious of anyone going door to door offering coronavirus testing or requesting personal info.
- Never carry unnecessary personal information, such as your Social Security card, in your wallet or purse.

Consumers who suspect a scam or an unfair business practice should contact the Ohio Attorney General's Office at [www.OhioProtects.org](http://www.OhioProtects.org) or 800-282-0515.

## **AG Yost Issues Warning to Ohioans to Watch for Covid-19 Vaccine Scams**

As real vaccines are approved and distributed, Ohioans are reminded that scammers watch and read the current news in an attempt to scam people using relevant schemes.

Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost is cautioning Ohioans to look out for COVID-19 vaccine-related scams that will occur as the vaccine is distributed on a limited basis.

"A single dose of information can vaccinate you against fraud," Yost said.

For example, consumers could see scammers impersonating distributors, providers or local health department claiming to need personal information such as a Social Security number to get on a list to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

Other scammers could pretend to be able to help consumers jump to the front of the line to get a vaccine, but ask for advanced payment to secure their place in line. These communications

could come through email, phone call, postal mail, text message or even through social media accounts.

Also, [reports](#) indicate that cards may be distributed to consumers that have been provided the first dose of a two-dose vaccine. These will likely be used to simply remind consumers to get their second dose, not as official “passports” to gain entry into bars, restaurants or other public areas, or to bypass public health orders. Therefore, any attempts to buy these cards will be fruitless.

The Ohio Attorney General’s Office recommends tips to help consumers avoid potential virus and vaccine-related scams:

- Double-check any new “too-good-to-be-true” news or claims. Contact your family doctor, your local health department or the statewide Ohio Department of Health’s COVID-19 call center (1-833-427-5634) to check on issues you are unsure about.
- Look for the red flags of a scam, such as being asked to wire money or send a prepaid money card or gift card to a stranger; being pressured to act immediately; or being told to buy a product or service where the company refuses to provide any information in writing.
- You likely will not need to pay anything out of pocket to get the vaccine during this public health emergency. You can’t pay to put your name on a list to get the vaccine. You can’t pay to get early access to the vaccine.
- No one from a vaccine distribution site or health care payer, like a private insurance company, will call you asking for your Social Security number or your credit card or bank account information to sign you up to get the vaccine. Do not give out your personal information to someone you don’t know over the phone, email, social media or text.

Consumers who suspect an unfair business practice or want help addressing a consumer problem should contact the Ohio Attorney General’s Office at [www.OhioProtects.org](http://www.OhioProtects.org) or 800-282-0515.

## Top Complaints of 2020

The Attorney General’s Office works every day to protect Ohio families from unfair and deceptive business practices and scams. The office accepts and handles consumer complaints through an informal dispute-resolution process to assist consumers and businesses in reaching a mutual agreement to resolve issues. In 2020, the office received over 24,000 complaints.

The Consumer Protection Section tracks complaints in several general categories for reporting purposes; in 2020, the top overall categories were:

1. Motor vehicles

2. Coronavirus-related
3. Shopping, food or beverage
4. Professional services
5. Collections, credit reporting or financial services
6. Home or property improvement
7. Utilities, phone, internet or TV services
8. Identity theft

Consumer complaints generally are handled by specialists from the Consumer Protection Section. Complaint resolution might involve, for example, a refund for the consumer or an adjustment of charges or services.

The office also takes complaints from small businesses and nonprofit organizations. In 2020, the office logged more than 700 complaints from small businesses or nonprofits and provided dispute resolution similar to that offered to consumers.

Our Civil Investigative Unit opened up nearly 246 cases in 2020, and the Civil Legal Unit filed 46 cases. Further, the Civil Legal Unit obtained over \$31 million in judgments in 2020 on behalf of the Ohio Attorney General's Office.

Our Economic Crimes Unit continued our efforts to identify, investigate and prosecute scam artists, opening over 459 criminal investigative matters in 2020. Working with local law enforcement and prosecutors, our Economic Crimes Unit filed 5 indictments and obtained 12 convictions.

In March 2020, as part of the Attorney General's anti-robocall initiative, the Consumer Protection Section introduced its new Robocall Enforcement Unit. Launched with the slogan "Just Don't Answer!" the Unit encourages Ohioans to not answer or reply to phone numbers they do not recognize. Using a new and more efficient complaint process designed specifically to empower Ohioans to report illegal robocalls, the Unit analyzes complaint data to try to put a stop to illegal and unwanted calls and texts. Since its inception, the Unit has received over 38,500 unwanted call reports.

Consumers who believe they have been treated unfairly or been the victim of identity theft should contact the Ohio Attorney General's Office at 800-282-0515 or visit [www.OhioProtects.org](http://www.OhioProtects.org).

## **Don't Fall For Romance Scams This February**

Valentine's Day can be a time to seek out that special someone, and con artists know it. Fake online romance or "sweetheart" scams are prevalent, so it is important to avoid them to protect your heart and your hard-earned money.

Romance scams typically begin when a con artist creates a phony profile on a dating website or on social media to attract unsuspecting victims. Many times, con artists claim to be located

in another state or country — pretending to be a military member stationed overseas or a businessperson working in another country. They might even send fake photos or documentation in order to “prove” their identity.

The scammer and the soon-to-be victim may spend countless hours communicating before the scammer asks for money – say, for airfare to visit, for hospital fees or other medical costs, to get out of a foreign country or to access an inheritance the scammer promises to share with the victim. Victims generally are asked to send money using a wire-transfer service, money order, prepaid card, gift card or other hard-to-trace payment method. Once the money is sent, it is nearly impossible to recover.

Last year, 39 Ohioans reported losing almost \$870,000 to sweetheart scams. For example, a Franklin County woman was the victim of a sweetheart scam with a man she had been in contact with through an online game chat feature. She sent money to the man via Bitcoin. The man deposited money into her account, which then she was to send to his son’s caregiver. The transaction was later reversed and the consumer lost \$64,000 to the scammer.

In another sweetheart scam, a Montgomery County man began a multi-year online relationship with a woman he met on a dating website. Over the course their relationship, he was scammed out of \$10,000 worth of gift cards and risked identity theft after providing her with his Social Security number.

Tips to avoid sweetheart scams include:

- Research someone you meet online; do not rely solely on what that person tells you. Conduct internet searches and check with independent sources to verify the person’s claims.
- Be cautious of individuals who claim that destiny or fate brought you together or, soon after you meet online, claim to love you.
- Be especially wary if you have just lost a loved one; many times scammers scour through obituaries to find people who have recently suffered a loss.
- Talk to friends and family members about any online relationships, even if the other person asks you to keep the relationship a secret.
- Don’t send money to someone you have met only online, even if you have developed a relationship with the individual.
- Be very skeptical of requests for money sent via wire transfer, Bitcoin, money order, prepaid money cards or gift cards. These are preferred payment methods for scammers.

Consumers who suspect a scam or an unfair business practice should contact the Ohio Attorney General’s Office at [www.OhioProtects.org](http://www.OhioProtects.org) or 800-282-0515.