

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



December 2022



## Smart tips to prepare for winter

With everything getting more expensive, Ohioans may be worried about their heating bills this winter. From energy efficiency improvements to utility choices, the Ohio Attorney General's Office has compiled some useful winter tips to help you stay safe and warm and to hopefully save a few dollars on your bill.

[Utility scams](#)

Scammers may call claiming that you are late with your payment and are about to lose service, but don't panic. Take time to ask for information that an account representative should have, such as your address or account number. If they don't have that information, it's likely a scam. Or, if you receive a phone call like this, hang up and call your utility company back at a number you know to be correct. While some disconnection notices may be legitimate, if the representative wants payment by gift card, it's very likely a scam. If you're concerned about disconnection, be sure to learn about Ohio's [Special Reconnection Order](#) that may make it more affordable to keep your utility services turned on.

### Energy savings and assistance efforts

If you're seeking to reduce your energy bills, consider getting a home energy audit offered by some local utility companies for free or at a low cost, or take an [online audit](#) to find areas where you can use energy more efficiently. Look to seal leaks around doors, windows and where pipes and wires enter your home. See if there are cracks or gaps in your existing caulking that need to be repaired. Make sure your home's insulation is up to the [U.S. Department of Energy's standards](#). Also, consider lowering your thermostat overnight or when you're not home. (A programmable thermostat may be a wise investment.)

Finally, learn about [low-income assistance programs](#) such as the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) and the Winter Crisis Program (also known as E-HEAP). HEAP can offer eligible residential consumers a one-time per winter heating season benefit that is applied directly to your electric, natural gas and/or bulk fuel bill. Individual utilities may operate their [own assistance programs](#) for qualifying residential consumers, generally known as fuel funds. Consumers should always do their research when assistance is offered – through these programs or through grants – to understand the terms of the assistance and whether the offer is legitimate.

### Tips for propane consumers

With supply chain issues and driver shortages, it is especially important for propane users to prepare properly throughout this upcoming winter heating season.

Some winter tips from the Propane Education & Research Council and the Ohio Attorney General's Office include:

- Ensure you have enough propane for winter. Never let the volume go below 25 percent without having an order in to your propane supplier for a fill up (the earlier, the better).
- If you run out of propane, call your supplier right away. They will likely inspect your system for potential leaks.
- Always be sure there is a clear path to your propane tank so delivery can occur.

The Ohio Attorney General's Office can assist propane users that have propane level emergencies. These emergencies receive priority handling by the office. The office's Help Center can be reached at 800-282-0515.

### Home repair and improvement fraud

While many legitimate companies exist to help repair or improve your home, here are some tips from the Federal Trade Commission and the Ohio Attorney General's Office to avoid weather-related fraud this winter:

- Be a skeptic if someone offers you a product or service promising dramatic cost-reduction results. Be a wise consumer and check the company's reputation. For example, look to the [Ohio Attorney General's Office](#) and the [Better Business Bureau](#), and do an online search for the company's name along with terms such as "scam" or "complaint."
- Watch for high-pressure sales tactics from door-to-door salespeople, especially concerning home improvement products or switching utility suppliers. Get all door-to-door promises in writing, and be sure you are provided at least three business days to cancel.
- Try not to pay with cash, since doing so leaves a limited paper trail if something goes wrong.

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.

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## Tips to avoid scams when selling online

Typically, the Consumer Protection Section helps Ohioans as they buy products and services. But what about consumers who want to *sell* their stuff? As you can imagine, scammers have found several ways to defraud consumers, especially when conducting business through online stores and auction sites, including social media or popular local buying and selling websites.

First, watch out for phony buyers who insist on paying through a mobile payment app. Scammers design clever look-alike payment notifications and hope you will send your merchandise before discovering it is a fake notification. Scammers may also claim there is a problem or issue with a payment they sent to you, such as they accidentally paid you twice for the item. They hope you, as the seller, will refund their "overpayment." In reality though, they never paid you the first time, so you may be out of your product and money.

Another typical overpayment scam involves a phony buyer issuing you a counterfeit check for more than you are selling the item. The scammer has you deposit the check and refund the difference (or send the difference to a phony "shipping agent" who is really part of the scam). Since banks often credit your account within hours of you presenting them with check, you may falsely assume that the check has cleared. The scammer takes your money that you sent back, but days later the check comes back to your bank as fake. At that point, the bank takes the money right back out of your account, possibly assessing you a returned check fee as well. If you've shipped your item to the scammer, that's gone too.

Another slightly more complicated scam hitting unsuspecting online sellers involves a phony buyer pretending to verify you're a legitimate seller, saying they are concerned about fake online listings. They send you a text message that includes a Google Voice verification code that they ask you to recite to them. If you give them the code, they will proceed to create a new Google Voice phone number linked to your real phone number. Then, they can scam sellers using a phone number linked to you, not them.

Consider the following tips to help avoid scams targeting sellers:

- Be prepared for potential scams by finding out what, if any, resources or protections are in place to sellers through the online site you are using.
- Be cautious when accepting mobile payments from strangers.
- Don't accept payments by check for more than your selling price, even if they appear to be a cashier's check or official money order. If you do, make sure the check has cleared prior to issuing any sort of refund.
- Never share verification codes with strangers.
- Report scams targeting sellers to the Ohio Attorney General's Office as well as to the online site you are using to sell your item.

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.

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## **AG Yost sues Dollar General and Family Dollar over deceptive pricing**

After receiving consumer complaints from multiple counties, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost has taken two chains of dollar stores – Dollar General and Family Dollar – to court for allegedly advertising goods for one price and charging a higher price at the register.

“Everything we buy these days costs more – Ohioans can ill-afford businesses that draw people in with the promise of low prices only to deceive them at the checkout counter,” Yost said. “This seems like a company trying to make an extra buck and hoping no one will notice. We've not only noticed but are taking action to stop it.”

Dollar General, a Tennessee-based company specializing in household goods, has operated in Ohio since 2015. It has 943 stores statewide.

Ohio Department of Agriculture rules permit stores to have up to a 2% error rate on overcharges. But testing done last month in Butler County by the county auditor's Department of Weights and Measures and made available to the Attorney General's Office found error rates ranging from 16.7% to 88.2% for 20 Dollar General stores.

Furthermore, from March 2021 to August 2022, the Attorney General's Office received 12 complaints detailing similar unfair and deceptive practices by Dollar General stores in Cuyahoga, Franklin, Highland, Lucas, Madison, Richland, Summit and Trumbull counties.

One consumer reported, for example, that a Dollar General in Franklin County listed shampoo at \$1 on the shelves but charged double that amount at the register. In certain instances, consumers alleged that even after they pointed out price discrepancies, the stores would not change the price.

The [lawsuit](#), filed in Butler County Common Pleas Court, cites violations of Ohio's Consumer Sales Practices Act, saying Dollar General listed false prices on items and engaged in bait advertising.

Just days after his office sued [Dollar General](#), Yost filed [suit](#) against Virginia-based Family Dollar for the same type of behavior.

The second lawsuit, also filed in Butler County, cites violations of Ohio's Consumer Sales Practices Act, saying that Family Dollar listed false prices on items and engaged in bait advertising.

Family Dollar was purchased by Dollar Tree in 2015 to reach low- and lower-middle-income households through urban and rural locations.

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

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## **Need help with immigration issues? Be wary of scammers posing as lawyers**

Do you or someone you know need help understanding and working with the U.S. immigration system? If so, be wary of "notarios." These are individuals who represent themselves as qualified to offer legal advice about immigration but, in fact, have no such qualification. Taking legal advice from notarios – some of whom might call themselves immigration consultants or immigration experts -- has led to problems that include incorrectly filed forms and missed deadlines, and worse. There have been cases where notarios have charged clients thousands of dollars and then abandoned them. In short, turning to notarios for legal advice can have devastating consequences that could ultimately prevent an individual from gaining admittance to the United States.

Whether from notarios or others who might take advantage of them, immigrants and their families are vulnerable to scams. Keep these tips in mind:

- Don't go to a notario, notario publico, or notary public for legal advice.
- Never pay for blank government forms. Government forms are free, though you'll probably have to pay a fee when you submit them. You can get free forms at [www.uscis.gov/forms](http://www.uscis.gov/forms), by calling the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) at 800-870-3676, or by visiting your nearest USCIS office.
- Get immigration information from official U.S. government websites. Make sure the website ends in ".gov," meaning it is a U.S. government site.
- Don't let anyone keep your original documents, such as birth certificate or passport.
- Never sign a form that has not been filled out, that contains false information or that you don't understand.
- Keep a copy of every form that you submit and every letter you receive from the government.
- Contact the Ohio State Bar Association for information on immigration attorneys in your area. Another resource for low-income consumers may be their local Legal Aid.

- Ask to see credentials. Work with an attorney licensed to practice law or an accredited representative capable of handling your immigration matters.

If you are the victim of an immigration scam:

- Contact your county prosecutor's office or county department of consumer affairs.
- File a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission [here](#).
- Report it to the Ohio Attorney General at 800-282-0515.

Those looking for a job or business opportunity are often targeted by scammers. The Federal Trade Commission has released a publication "[Fatima Says No to an Income Scam](#)" that details specific money-making opportunity scams specifically targeting immigrants. Money-making opportunity scams entice people interested in working from home to purchase a number of items that they can then sell for a big profit. These products tend to be very difficult to sell leaving the person in debt with no real prospect of selling the products they have purchased.

If you are considering a money-making opportunity:

- Research the company: Use resources such as the [Ohio Attorney General's Office](#) and the [Better Business Bureau](#), and do an online search for the company's name along with terms such as "scam" or "complaint."
- Ask a friend: If you know someone who has worked selling products directly to consumers, ask them about their experience.
- Avoid high pressure tactics: If the company is pressuring you for an immediate confirmation of employment or financial commitment, reconsider working with that company.

If you need help addressing a consumer problem or question, contact the Ohio Attorney General's Office at [www.OhioProtects.org](http://www.OhioProtects.org) or 800-282-0515.