

Utility Shut-Off Scams



The Office of the
Minnesota Attorney General
helping people afford their lives and live with dignity, safety, and respect

Minnesota is a state with four seasons. When temperatures spike over 90 or dip below zero degrees, it can be crucial to keep the power on. And people count on electricity to fuel our technology. Scam artists threaten to turn off utility services if people don't "pay up."

It could happen like this:

"Ben" got a call at work from someone who claimed to be from his company's electric service provider. The caller claimed Ben's company was behind on its electric bill and said that the power would be shut off if a payment was not made within an hour. Ben told the caller he would check with his bookkeeper and call back. The bookkeeper said all payments were current. Ben's electric provider then confirmed that Ben's business did not have a late balance and it had not placed the call.

How the Scam Works

A person or organization receives a call from someone who claims to represent the utility company. Most often, the individual claims the person or organization is behind on their electric bill and threatens to shut down the power soon if the money is not paid. The scam artists usually ask people to pay the "balance" via prepaid debit card or wire transfer.

The scam artist may try to create a sense of urgency to prevent the person or business from verifying the legitimacy of the call. While scam artists most often impersonate electric utilities, scammers sometimes impersonate other utility companies, such as television providers or water utility companies.

How to Protect Yourself or Your Organization

There are steps you can take to protect yourself:

Verify the legitimacy of the call before acting.

Before sending money to someone demanding payment, verify that the call actually came from your utility company by calling the number on your bill or on its website. Scam artists will sometimes "spoof" the real number for a utility company, so even if your caller ID shows the company's official number, it is best to hang up and call back if the call seems suspicious.

Beware of unusual payment methods

If the caller demands you send payment via a prepaid debit card or wire transfer, that is generally a red flag that the call is part of a scam. Prepaid debit cards and wire transfers are difficult to trace, and it can be almost impossible to recover the money once it is sent.

Be careful providing information over the phone and online

It is a good rule of thumb to avoid providing any information—including credit card numbers, checking account information, or other personal information—over the phone to people who call you.

Most utility companies will allow you to mail payment directly to the company, or pay via a secured website

If you feel suspicious about a caller telling you to make a payment via a website, check to make sure the website is secure. A secure website name starts with "https://"—remember the "s" is for secure. In general, "http://" websites are vulnerable to attack.

Don't be rushed

If a caller tries to keep you on the phone to prevent you from verifying the call, or says you must pay immediately to prevent your power from being disconnected, the call may not be legitimate. Tell the caller you would like to verify the call is legitimate and then call back at a trusted number for the company.

Reporting Utility Shut-Off Scam Calls

If you receive a utility shut-off scam call, you should report it to your utility company. You should also report the call to your local police department or sheriff's office.

You can also report utility shut-off scams to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which has the authority to enforce federal laws regulating nuisance calls and interstate fraud over the telephone. The FTC may be reached as follows:

Federal Trade Commission
Consumer Response Center
600 Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest
Washington, DC 20580
(877) 382-4357
TTY: (866) 653-4261
www.reportfraud.ftc.gov

For more information, or to file a complaint, contact the Office of Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison as follows:

Office of Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison
445 Minnesota Street, Suite 1400
St. Paul, MN 55101
(651) 296-3353 (Twin Cities Calling Area)
(800) 657-3787 (Outside the Twin Cities)
(800) 627-3529 (Minnesota Relay)
www.ag.state.mn.us