



## FRAUD ALERT: Harvey, Irma, and Maria Disaster Scams

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and HUD Office of Inspector General (OIG) warns everyone affected by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria to be alert for fraud schemes that commonly occur following a disaster. You need to protect yourself from fraudsters who will take advantage of the confusing nature of information after a major disaster.

**Watch out for scam housing inspectors.** Fraudsters may impersonate inspectors from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or the Small Business Administration. These imposters may ask for banking information, ask for money for fees, or attempt to steer you to a certain repair firm. Others may seek personal information they will use to steal your identity.

### Protect yourself

- ✓ Real inspectors already have your nine digit registration number and other personal information and will not need to ask for it.
- ✓ Inspectors document the damage to your home; they do not arrange or suggest repairs.
- ✓ Always ask to see government identification before you share information.

**Watch out for scam contractors.** There will be scam contractors rushing to take advantage of homeowners. These scammers often ask for large upfront payments and then do shoddy work or disappear altogether. Because these fly-by-night contractors are not local, you will have no way to find them later if they do not perform the work promised. They have no permanent address, and they do not answer phone calls. Some scammers may low ball their bid and add charges once you have signed a contract.

### Protect yourself:

- ✓ Only hire contractors for whom you can get references.
  - ✓ In Florida, a general contractor must be licensed to bid on a job, so you can search online <https://www.myfloridalicense.com/wl11.asp?mode=1&SID=&brd=&typ=&> if they have a license.
  - ✓ Texas does not license general contractors, only some specialties like electrical, plumbing, and heating and air conditioning. Also, in Texas general contractors do not have to carry liability insurance or have worker's compensation. Ask to see their coverage. If they are not an established local contractor ask to take a photo of the contractor's driver's license, contractor's license, or other photo ID.

- ✓ Be very suspicious of contractors knocking on your door seeking work. This is a common approach used by unestablished companies. They often demand that you pay the entire amount upfront, saying they need to buy materials. Negotiate to buy the materials yourself. If they won't agree, walk away from the deal.
- ✓ Be suspicious if contractors won't provide a written contract and say they trust your handshake. Always have a written contract that spells out the exact work to be done and a payment schedule that isn't based on time but rather the percentage of work that is done satisfactorily.
- ✓ Get all job changes in writing. Usually job changes mean more cost to the homeowner, so be cautious before agreeing to any changes. If you accept the contractor's explanation of why the problem and cost were missed originally, make sure you receive an amended contract or a work order that you and the contractor sign. The work order should describe the problem, the solution, the cost of labor and materials, and a revised payment schedule.
- ✓ Be suspicious if a contractor tells you building permits are not needed or that the city has waived them for the disaster. Ensure that your contractor obtains needed building permits and that the city conducts any required interim and final inspections on the contractor's work. Call your local building department or planning office to verify what permits you need.
- ✓ Be suspicious if it is a one-time offer, available only today, or a special deal on materials leftover from another job. These are pressure tactics to get you into the deal.
- ✓ Be suspicious of very high bids. Scammers will claim that disaster-related costs are going to be high. Always get another bid or two to protect against overpricing. Although you are eager to get someone in to start repairs, taking the time to protect yourself may save you a lot of money and frustration in the long run.

**Watch out for fake relief programs.** Be suspicious of scammers claiming to be from the government or other relief agencies. Fake officials will ask for application payments or fees to release grants or loans to you. Be suspicious of online charities or door-to-door solicitations. *Hundreds of new websites added the week before Harvey struck are associated with potentially bogus relief efforts.* These sites are not regulated, and it's hard to know which are real and which may be scams.

### **Protect yourself**

- ✓ Government agencies do not charge for applications.
- ✓ Knowing that Federal and State employees do not ask for or accept money.
- ✓ Always asking to see the identification cards of those claiming to be with government agencies.

- ✓ Check out charities before donating. If you are unsure of a charity's legitimacy check it out at [Charity Navigator](#), [Charity Watch](#), and [Give.org](#).

**Watch out for flooded cars for resale.** If you or someone you know lost a car to flooding and are in a hurry to replace it, beware of scammers who may clean up previously flooded cars and try to resell them.

### Protect yourself

- ✓ Enter the vehicle identification number at [VINCheck](#). This a free service from the National Insurance Crime Bureau that could reveal a vehicle's flood damage and previous ownership from a flood location. [Carfax](#) and [AutoCheck](#) are also good sources.
- ✓ Do your own investigation!
  - ✓ Musty smells indicate mildew is still present.
  - ✓ Overpowering fragrances suggest that the seller may be hiding something suspicious.
  - ✓ Watch out for carpeting that looks too new, is discolored, or has water stains.
  - ✓ Test electrical systems, check for water in lamps and gauges, and look for silt in air vents and other hard to clean places in the car.

*If you suspect any frauds mentioned above, call the FEMA Disaster Fraud Hotline at **866-720-5721**.*

*If you are a victim, suspect a home repair scam, are contacted for unsolicited information, or believe a business is practicing price gouging, call*

- *the Office of the Texas Attorney General at **800-252-8011** or*
- *the Florida Attorney General Fraud Hotline: **866-966-7226**.*

**Watch out for mortgage rescue scams.** Hundreds of thousands of federally-insured homes have been damaged and some may not have flood insurance. Because many homeowners may have a temporary or permanent loss of income due to the disasters, they may find it hard to make their mortgage payments. In efforts to avoid foreclosures on their homes, these survivors may be targeted for foreclosure or loan modification rescue scams.

### Protect yourself

- ✓ Be aware that federally-insured mortgages in the disaster areas are subject to a 90-day foreclosure moratorium following a disaster.
- ✓ Be suspicious of companies claiming that they can help you avoid foreclosure or get you a loan modification. They usually charge you a large fee and disappear with your money.
- ✓ Contact your mortgage company to determine options if your home does not have flood insurance or if you are having problems keeping up with mortgage payments

- ✓ If you have a mortgage, talk with your loan servicer immediately. If you cannot reach a loan servicer, call a [HUD counselor](#) about your options. Click or use this link (<https://www.hud.gov/offices/hsg/sfh/hcc/fc/>). You may be eligible to have your mortgage payment suspended for 12 months with no penalty at the end of that time.
- ✓ Call your hazard or homeowners insurance company. It is important to start the paperwork for any coverage you may have.
- ✓ Finally, call FEMA and apply for disaster aid. They have several resources to help. Call 800-621-3362 or visit [disasterassistance.gov](#).

**Don't Be Persuaded to Commit Fraud Yourself.** As government aid is released, you may have others tell you it is okay to misrepresent your eligibility or misuse the funds you receive.

### **Protect yourself**

- ✓ Only apply for aid you are eligible to receive.
- ✓ Do not try to claim a vacation or rental home as a permanent residence.
- ✓ Do not claim damages that were preexisting.
- ✓ Do not apply for duplicate benefits (such as rental vouchers or repair funds) from different government agencies.
- ✓ Do not use repair or elevation funds received for other purposes.
- ✓ If you received federal assistance for previous disasters, and did not maintain flood insurance as required afterwards, you might not be eligible for additional relief

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Violators trying to defraud aid programs will face prison time and/or fines. Be a part of the solution: Don't defraud deserving people of their share, and if you see someone scheming on other people's misfortune, report it.

### **If you suspect fraud, call or write the HUD OIG hotline.**

**EMAIL:** [hotline@hudoig.gov](mailto:hotline@hudoig.gov)  
**CALL:** 1-800-347-3735  
**FAX:** 202-708-4829  
**WRITE:** HUD Inspector General Hotline (GFI)  
451 7th Street SW  
Washington, DC 20410