

Common Phone Scams Explained

UTILITY SCAM

HOW IT WORKS:

You get a call from someone claiming to represent your local utility company. The caller will insist you're behind on your utility bill and threaten to shut off service immediately if a payment for the past due amount is not made. They may request your bank or credit card information or ask for payment in a form that's harder to trace, like debit or credit cards, gift cards, wire transfer, money order, cash and, most recently, even cryptocurrency.

Most often, scammers will impersonate electric utility representatives, but scam artists have also been known to pose as representatives of gas, water or television providers.

RED FLAGS TO RECOGNIZE:

1. You're contacted out of the blue. Even if your utility didn't get your payment, they won't cut off your service without warning. They have to send notices to tell you the bill is overdue and give you a disconnection date if it's not paid. If this is the first time you've heard about your payment being late, it's probably a scam.
2. There is a sense of urgency to act. Some companies may call to let you know your bill is past due, but they won't insist you pay immediately over the phone.
3. Threatening and vulgar language. Real utility representatives should be calm and professional, even if they're calling you about an unpaid bill. If the caller takes a hostile or threatening tone, they're probably a scammer.
4. Untraceable payment methods. Most utilities don't even accept these payments in the form of wire transfer or prepaid debit card, and no utility will insist on it.
5. Requires you to provide personal information. Never provide bank or credit card information if you didn't initiate the call, even if your caller ID shows the caller is your utility company. The technology used to spoof caller IDs is easily accessible online.

HOW TO HANDLE IT:

Hang up! Don't engage or provide any personal information. If you have questions about the legitimacy of the call, you should contact your utility by calling the number on your bill or on the company's website.

Report utility shut-off scams to your utility company and your local police department or sheriff's office so they can warn others in your community.

You can also report utility scams to the Federal Trade Commission at 1-877-382-4357 and the South Dakota Attorney General's Division of Consumer Protection at 605-773-4400.