

Town of Middlebury
Emergency Management Bulletin
April 9, 2020

WARNING – POLICE IMPOSTERS

We've heard reports that individuals in other areas are posing as law enforcement people -- stopping cars, approaching people and telling them they are in violation of the Governor's orders. The other night, a Middlebury woman was pulled over while driving home from work by a male who identified himself as a "Trooper" and told her she was out after the Governor's curfew and demanded to see her papers and wanted to know the reason she was out.

The police aren't going to do this. There is no "Governor's Curfew" and the police aren't going to stop you and tell you that you are in violation of the Governor's orders (see the last item in this bulletin). Middlebury officers and Vermont Troopers are in uniform and drive clearly marked police cars. Officers work in uniform. If you are stopped at all it will be for a significant traffic violation, not a Governor's Order violation. If you experience this, please call the police immediately. If you are on such a stop, call police dispatch at the time if you can for verification. You will not be stopped by police dressed in plain clothes or an unmarked car.

Beware of Fraud

Covid-19-related fraud and price gouging is growing exponentially as schemers go after those who are trying to keep their families safe. Law enforcement is not immune to these schemes. Every day at the police department we receive solicitation calls and emails offering to provide us with personal protective equipment from a "warehouse in New Jersey where they've discovered a big supply" and other such nonsense. Payment up front, please. No, we don't get drawn into the scheme. There are also those who offer questionable products at exorbitant prices.

Please be careful. Both the Vermont Attorney General and the FBI encourage the reporting of such fraud. I strongly encourage anyone who comes across something suspicious to report it to the FBI at tips.fbi.gov or to the Internet Crime Complaint Center at ic3.gov or to the Vermont Attorney General.

The following is a Q&A from Steven Merrill, head of the FBI's financial crimes section:

Q: Why is this pandemic, or any disaster, such an opportunity for scammers and criminals?

A: Unfortunately, criminals are very opportunistic. They see a vulnerable population out there that they can prey upon. People are scared and looking for help. People are trying to protect themselves and their families.

For example, people are looking for medical attention and medical equipment. They also may be unemployed and looking for work. There may be an extra level of desperation right now that may cause someone to make an emotional decision that could make them a victim.

Q: What are some of the most common fraud schemes you're seeing?

A: Government Impersonators

One of the most prevalent schemes we're seeing is government impersonators. Criminals are reaching out to people through social media, emails, or phone calls pretending to be from the government. In some cases, they're even going door-to-door to try to convince someone that they need to provide money for COVID testing, financial relief, or medical equipment.

We are a very trusting society, but it's important to know that the government will not reach out to you this way. If someone reaches out to you directly and says they're from the government helping you with virus-related issues, it's likely a scam. This "government" representative may be trying to use phishing or other techniques to hack your computer or get your personal information or money.

Fraudulent Cures or Medical Equipment

Right now, the threat we're most concerned about is fake cures or treatments for the virus. These "cures" can be extremely dangerous to your health - even fatal. You should never accept a medical treatment or virus test from anyone other than your doctor, pharmacist, or local health department.

Work-from-Home Fraud

People who are at home and out of work are vulnerable to work-from-home scams. If someone you don't know contacts you and wants you to urgently pay them in return for a "job," you are dealing with a criminal. Legitimate jobs will not ask you to pay them.

If you're in a role like this where you're being asked to send or move money, you're acting as a money mule, which is a federal crime.

Investment Fraud

One of the most lucrative schemes for criminals is offering you an opportunity to invest in a cure or treatment for the virus. The purpose of these get-rich-quick schemes is simply to defraud the investor. Any offer like this should be treated with extreme caution.

Q: What potential scams should people be aware of regarding government financial benefits?

A: The government will not ask you for personal information to give you your financial benefits. If you receive an email, text message, or phone call claiming to help you get your benefits, do not respond.

If you are eligible to receive the benefits, your government check will be mailed to you or will be direct-deposited into your bank account.

Q: What is the FBI doing about these scammers?

A: We're investigating many of these cases right now. We've already arrested and filed charges against those who we have evidence to believe are engaging in these crimes. We have teams of FBI employees working these cases every day.

Q: What can people do to protect themselves from scammers?

A: Use extreme caution in online communication. For emails, verify who the sender is -- criminals will sometimes change just one letter in an email address to make it look like one you know. Be very wary of attachments or links; hover your mouse over a link before clicking to see where it's sending you.

In general, be suspicious of anyone offering you something that's "too good to be true" or is a secret investment opportunity or medical advice. Seek out legitimate sources of information.

For medical information, those trusted sources are your own doctor, [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov), and your local health department. For financial information, that's [ftc.gov](https://www.ftc.gov) or [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov).

Governor's Orders- Enforcement Clarified

The intent of the Governor's orders is to make sure people are social distancing to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 and thereby reduce the stress on health care systems. We know now that people who may have been exposed, who may have contracted the disease but are not showing symptoms, most often test negative, only to test positive later when they develop symptoms. They are essentially the "Typhoid Marys" of COVID-19. The testing is not yet sophisticated enough to detect this.

SO - wear your masks in public and maintain social distancing. Stay at home. No social gatherings. If you are involved in activities that are outside the scope of the Governor's Orders, you may be advised by a police officer that you are in violation. But we do not stop cars and ask for "your papers" or stop you on the street nor shut down an activity. We are taking a reasonable approach to the enforcement of orders -- if the activity is in keeping with the social distance intent of the order, there should not be a problem.

The police will follow up on reports of businesses operating in spite of the order and will recommend they cease operation. A report will be forwarded to the Attorney General. The A.G. may issue a cease-and-desist order on review of the activity. Failing that the A.G. may serve a court order to cease. Further violations will be considered contempt of a court order and may result in prosecution.