

Justice Department Officials Raise Awareness of Disaster Fraud Hotline

WASHINGTON – The Department of Justice, the FBI and the National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) remind the public there is a potential for disaster fraud in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Suspected fraudulent activity pertaining to relief efforts associated with the recent series of tornadoes in the Midwest and South should be reported to the NCDF hotline at 866-720-5721. The hotline is staffed by a live operator 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for the purpose of reporting suspected scams being perpetrated by criminals in the aftermath of disasters.

NCDF was originally established in 2005 by the Department of Justice to investigate, prosecute and deter fraud associated with federal disaster relief programs following Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma. Its mission has expanded to include suspected fraud related to any natural or man-made disaster. More than 20 federal agencies, including the Justice Department's Criminal Division, U.S. Attorneys' Offices and the FBI, participate in the NCDF, allowing the center to act as a centralized clearinghouse of information related to disaster relief fraud.

In the wake of natural disasters, many individuals feel compelled to contribute to victim assistance programs and organizations across the country. The Department of Justice and the FBI remind the public to apply a critical eye and do its due diligence before giving to anyone soliciting donations on behalf of tornado victims. Solicitations can originate from e-mails, websites, door-to-door collections, mailings and telephone calls, and similar methods.

Before making a donation of any kind, consumers should adhere to certain guidelines, including the following:

- Do not respond to any unsolicited (spam) incoming emails, including clicking links contained within those messages, because they may contain computer viruses.
- Be skeptical of individuals representing themselves as surviving victims or officials asking for donations via email or social networking sites.
- Beware of organizations with copycat names similar to but not exactly the same as those of reputable charities.
- Rather than following a purported link to a website, verify the existence and legitimacy of non-profit organizations by utilizing various Internet-based resources.
- Be cautious of emails that claim to show pictures of the disaster areas in attached files, because the files may contain viruses. Only open attachments from known senders.
- To ensure that contributions are received and used for intended purposes, make donations directly to known organizations rather than relying on others to make the donation on your behalf.
- Do not be pressured into making contributions; reputable charities do not use coercive tactics.
- Do not give your personal or financial information to anyone who solicits contributions. Providing such information may compromise your identity and make you vulnerable to identity theft.
- Avoid cash donations if possible. Pay by debit or credit card, or write a check directly to the charity. Do not make checks payable to individuals.
- Legitimate charities do not normally solicit donations via money transfer services.
- Most legitimate charities maintain websites ending in .org rather than .com.

In addition to raising public awareness, the NCDF is the intake center for all disaster relief fraud. Therefore, if you observe that someone has submitted a fraudulent claim for disaster relief, or any other suspected fraudulent activities pertaining to the receipt of government funds as part of disaster relief or clean up, please contact the NCDF.

If you believe that you have been a victim of fraud by a person or organization soliciting relief funds on behalf of tornado victims, or if you discover fraudulent disaster relief claims submitted by a person or organization, contact the NCDF by phone at (866) 720-5721, fax at (225) 334-4707 or email at disaster@leo.gov.

You can also report suspicious e-mail solicitations or fraudulent websites to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center at www.ic3.gov.