



Department of Justice

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Western District of Pennsylvania

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**U.S. Attorney Scott Brady and Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro Announce
Formation of Joint Western Pennsylvania COVID-19 Task Force**

PITTSBURGH - Scott W. Brady, United States Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro today announced the formation of a joint federal and state Western Pennsylvania COVID-19 Fraud Task Force to investigate and prosecute coronavirus-related fraud.

The Western Pennsylvania COVID-19 Fraud Task Force will bring together federal and state investigative agencies and prosecutors to receive public information on myriad scams being perpetrated on-line and in-person by scammers seeking to exploit the evolving coronavirus public health crisis. The Task Force will marshal the collective investigative power of our federal and state law enforcement agencies by forming joint investigative teams, and prosecutors from both offices will be cross-designated to work on such investigations together.

The Task Force will be led by the U.S. Attorney's Office COVID-19 Fraud Coordinator and an Executive Deputy Attorney General of Pennsylvania. Task Force members include representatives from the United States Attorney's Office, the Pennsylvania Office of the Attorney General, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the United States Secret Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, Immigration and Customs Enforcement/Homeland Security Investigations, Social Security Administration – Office of Inspector General, the U.S. Department of Education – Office of Inspector General and the Pennsylvania State Police.

“Attorney General Shapiro and I have spoken on a regular basis during this crisis,” said U.S. Attorney Brady. “In coordinating the response of federal and state law enforcement to COVID19 fraud, we felt it was critical that the United States Attorney's Office for the Western District of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office form a joint COVID19 Fraud Task Force. Our goal is simple: we seek to ensure there is no gap between the shields of federal and state law enforcement in protecting the public from fraudsters – whether here in Pennsylvania or around the globe - who would exploit this crisis in order to harm the citizens of western Pennsylvania. Bad guys should know we are open for business. We will find you and we will stop you. Together, the outstanding men and women of the U.S. Attorney's Office and the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office will continue to work day and night to protect our families, friends and neighbors during this crisis.”

“I’m grateful for the partnership between the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General and the U.S. Attorney’s Office during these challenging times,” said Attorney General Josh Shapiro. “People across Pennsylvania are concerned about their health and their economic futures, and it is despicable that retailers, distributors, and wholesalers are taking advantage of people. The joint COVID19 Task Force allows my Office, and our federal partners, to quickly combat fraudsters who want to exploit Pennsylvanians. This is a time to band together—not to give into unlawful greed.”

The goal of the Task Force is to protect the citizens of western Pennsylvania from fraudsters who seek to take advantage of the fear and confusion many feel surrounding the coronavirus. Fraudsters are targeting vulnerable members of our community, including our seniors, by setting up websites to sell bogus products, and using fake emails, texts, and social media posts as a ruse to take your money and get your personal information. The emails and posts may be promoting awareness and prevention tips, and fake information about cases in your neighborhood. They also may be asking you to donate to victims, offering advice on unproven treatments, or contain malicious email attachments.

Some examples of COVID-19 scams include:

- **Treatment scams:** Scammers are offering to sell fake cures, vaccines, and advice on unproven treatments for COVID-19.
- **Supply scams:** Scammers are creating fake shops, websites, social media accounts, and email addresses claiming to sell medical supplies currently in high demand, such as surgical masks. When consumers attempt to purchase supplies through these channels, fraudsters pocket the money and never provide the promised supplies.
- **Provider scams:** Scammers are also contacting people by phone and email, pretending to be doctors and hospitals that have treated a friend or relative for COVID-19, and demanding payment for that treatment.
- **Charity scams:** Scammers are soliciting donations for individuals, groups, and areas affected by COVID-19.
- **Phishing scams:** Scammers posing as national and global health authorities, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), are sending phishing emails designed to trick recipients into downloading malware or providing personal identifying and financial information.
- **App scams:** Scammers are also creating and manipulating mobile apps designed to track the spread of COVID-19 to insert malware that will compromise users’ devices and personal information.
- **Investment scams:** Scammers are offering online promotions on various platforms, including social media, claiming that the products or services of publicly traded companies can prevent, detect, or cure COVID-19, and that the stock of these companies will dramatically increase in value as a result. These promotions are often styled as “research reports,” make predictions of a specific “target price,” and relate to microcap stocks, or low-priced stocks issued by the smallest of companies with limited publicly available information.
- **Price Gouging scams:** Individuals and businesses may sell essential goods, like hand sanitizer, for significantly higher prices than in a non-emergency setting. It is legally considered price gouging when the price of one of these products increases more than 20 percent its price one week prior to an emergency declaration from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

U.S. Attorney Brady and Attorney General Shapiro urge everyone, especially those most at risk of serious illness, to avoid these and similar scams by taking the following steps:

- Independently verify the identity of any company, charity, or individual that contacts you regarding COVID-19.
- Check the websites and email addresses offering information, products, or services related to COVID-19. Be aware that scammers often employ addresses that differ only slightly from those belonging to the entities they are impersonating. For example, they might use “cdc.com” or “cdc.org” instead of “cdc.gov.”
- Be wary of unsolicited emails offering information, supplies, or treatment for COVID-19 or requesting your personal information for medical purposes. Legitimate health authorities will not contact the general public this way.
- Do not click on links or open email attachments from unknown or unverified sources. Doing so could download a virus onto your computer or device.
- Make sure the anti-malware and anti-virus software on your computer is operating and up to date.
- Ignore offers for a COVID-19 vaccine, cure, or treatment. Remember, if there is a medical breakthrough, you won’t hear about it for the first time through an email, online ad, or unsolicited sales pitch.
- Check online reviews of any company offering COVID-19 products or supplies. Avoid companies whose customers have complained about not receiving items.
- Research any charities or crowdfunding sites soliciting donations in connection with COVID-19 before giving. Remember, an organization may not be legitimate even if it uses words like “CDC” or “government” in its name or has reputable looking seals or logos on its materials. For online resources on donating wisely, visit the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) website.
- Be wary of any business, charity, or individual requesting payments or donations in cash, by wire transfer, gift card, or through the mail. Don’t send money through any of these channels.
- Be cautious of “investment opportunities” tied to COVID-19, especially those based on claims that a small company’s products or services can help stop the virus. If you decide to invest, carefully research the investment beforehand. For information on how to avoid investment fraud, visit the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) website.
- For the most up-to-date information on COVID-19, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) websites.

We urge you: don’t fall victim to these frauds. We have set up a dedicated toll free Hotline and dedicated email addresses for the public to report suspected COVID-19 fraud. If you believe you have been a target or victim of these frauds, please report them the Task Force at:

- Western Pennsylvania COVID-19 Fraud Task Force’s Toll Free Hotline:
1-888-C19-WDPA or 1-888-219-9372
- Western Pennsylvania COVID-19 Fraud Task Force’s email address:
usapaw.covid19@usdoj.gov
- Pennsylvania Attorney General’s price gouging email address:
pricegouging@attorneygeneral.gov