

Fraud Awareness & Prevention

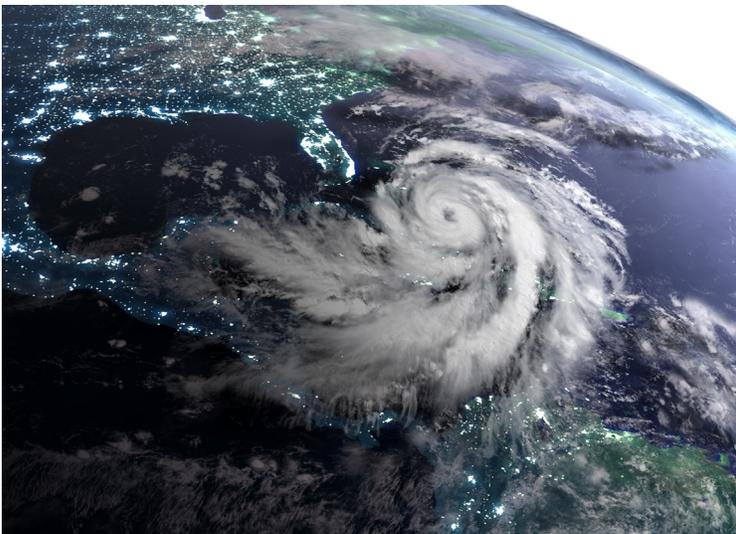
Volume 6



Hurricane Ian

On September 28, 2022, Hurricane Ian, a powerful Category 4 hurricane with sustained winds of 115 mph or greater, impacted the southwest Florida coast before tracking across the peninsula and entering the Atlantic Ocean. The winds and storm surge damaged or destroyed tens of thousands of homes and businesses. Immediately after the storm had passed, local, state, and federal relief workers began helping the affected residents recover.

Additionally, private organizations and large numbers of volunteers, including volunteers from First Lady Casey DeSantis' Hope Heroes, the volunteer team she assembled as part of her Hope Florida – A Pathway to Purpose initiative, in partnership with the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, deployed to Charlotte and Lee counties to help seniors in need following Hurricane Ian.



Unfortunately, post-storm, there is always the potential for consumer fraud by individuals with ill intent, determined to take advantage of people in their times of need. The following information is provided to you as a guide to help you become familiar with some of the types of scams perpetrated against people after a storm.

Scams After Disasters

After a natural disaster, consumers should be wary of tree service scams, building and home-repair scams, disaster-relief scams, and water-testing-and-treatment scams. After a disaster, qualified contractors are in high demand, providing opportunities for scam artists to take advantage of those finding it difficult to find help. If your home is damaged, be sure to follow these tips when hiring a contractor.

Protect Yourself

- Watch out for unsolicited offers or contractors claiming they can perform repairs at a discount with leftover supplies from another job.
- Have your insurance company evaluate damage before arranging repairs to ensure that the work will be covered under your policy.
- Get at least three written, itemized estimates or bids on repairs.
- Verify that a contractor has a license with local and state licensing boards.
- Ensure the contractor is licensed for the job. Check to see whether a company is properly licensed and whether there are any consumer

complaints filed against a licensed contractor at the Department of Professional Business Regulation's website, MyFloridaLicense.com.

- Research the company and its reputation – ask for references.
- Contact the Florida Attorney General's Office at 1 (866) 9NO-SCAM to see if there are complaints against a company or contractor.
- Check for proof of insurance and verify with the insurer that their policy is current.
- Check to see whether the contractor is bonded and verify with the bonding agency.
- Never pay the full amount of a repair upfront and hesitate before providing large deposits.
- Read the entire contract, including the fine print, before signing to ensure it includes the required buyer's right to cancel language. Understand cancellation rights and penalties you may experience for canceling.
- Insist on releases of any liens that could be placed on the property from all subcontractors prior to making final payments. Homeowners may unknowingly have liens placed against their properties by suppliers or subcontractors who have not been paid by the contractor. If the contractor fails to pay them, the liens will remain on the title.
- Do not sign a certificate of completion or make final payment until you are satisfied with the work performed.



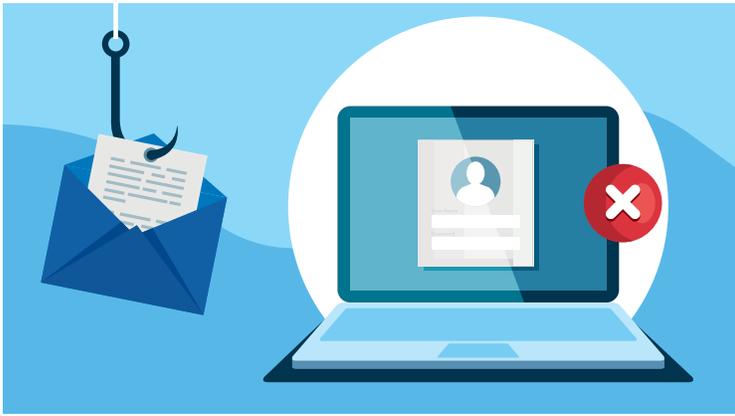
Assignment of Benefits Scams

Many contractors may ask you to complete an Assignment of Benefits (AOB) which allows the homeowner who holds the insurance policy to sign over their insurance rights or benefits to the contractor or other third parties. The contractor or third party can then file an insurance claim, make repair decisions, and collect on benefits without the homeowner's involvement. While AOBs can offer convenience to policyholders attempting to navigate the insurance claims process, unscrupulous individuals and companies may seek to take advantage of the power an AOB provides. If your home is damaged, keep the following in mind as you seek to make repairs:

- Be wary of any company that pressures you to sign or insists upon the use of an AOB to do repairs.
- Read the entire contract carefully to ensure you are not signing over your benefits without your full knowledge and consent.
- Do not sign an AOB if there are blank spaces in the document.

New laws effective July 1, 2019, allow AOBs to be rescinded within 14 days of execution of the AOB, or within 30 days after the scheduled work start date if the assignee has not begun substantial work. Or, if no start date is listed, a new AOB can be rescinded at least 30 days following the execution date if the assignee has not begun substantial work

Source: *DOEA 2022 Disaster Resource Guide*
elderaffairs.org/programs-services/disaster-preparedness



Work From Home Schemes

A lingering effect of the pandemic is the desire to work from home. Unfortunately, fraudsters have developed schemes to take advantage of this desire. Deceitful people are creating fake job postings and use these to steal your personal information or financial assets. As work-from-home jobs become more popular, scammers are starting to target this market with seemingly lucrative job offers. They may pose as a company or reputable person to get you to trust them. To avoid being a victim of these scams:

- Do not respond to calls, text messages, or emails from unknown numbers or suspicious addresses.
- Never share sensitive personal or financial information over email, text messages, or over the phone.
- Do not click any links in a text message from a number you do not recognize. If a friend sends you a text with a suspicious link that seems out of character, call them to make sure they weren't hacked.
- Offers that seem too good to be true, such as "Part Time Work for Full Time Pay!" are scams.
- Use the internet to check on the company offering employment.
- Be suspicious of anyone too eager to hire you.
- Never pay someone for the opportunity to be hired or for the training you will need to perform the new job.
- File a report with local law enforcement if you have lost money or possessions due to a scam.

Helpline Fraud

One of the most recent frauds that has come to light involves popular "Helpline" phone numbers. Scammers secure numbers very similar to a legitimate Helpline number. When someone accidentally misdials the legitimate number, they are connected to a scammer. To protect yourself, do the following:

- Carefully dial Helpline numbers.
- If the Helpline is answered by someone who says the Helpline is down and offers a gift card as an apology, hang up!

Reporting Workplace Fraud

The Florida Department of Elder Affairs Office of Inspector General is a resource for employees, contractors, and subcontractors related to fraud in the workplace.

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) encourages all employees, contractors, and subcontractors to report any suspected fraudulent activity. If possible, report incidents of suspected fraudulent activity to your supervisor.

If you are unable to report the suspected fraudulent activity to your supervisor, you can notify the Office of Inspector General via email at OIG@elderaffairs.org or by calling (850) 414-2311.

All reports of suspected fraudulent activity will be reviewed and may or may not rise to the level of an investigation.

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