

PRESS RELEASE

Real Estate Scam in southeast Minnesota

It's not just holiday scams that are making the rounds this time of year. It seems that consumers are fair game for scam artists in other areas as well. The "rental" scam has been in our area for some time, but it's rearing its ugly head in again. At a time when people can least afford to be "duped," the Southeast Minnesota Association of REALTORS is getting reports from both consumers and REALTORS that criminals from outside of the United States are scraping photos and information on homes for sale and offering them for rent on such websites as Craigslist, Hotpads.com, Trulia and other sites offering rental properties.

Here's how it works. Homes for sale are offered for rent at an attractive (can it be true?) price. The scammer has a story. Sometimes it's even a good story. For example, they had to return home (most examples of the scams originate in Nigeria or West Africa) and weren't able to get their home sold before they had to move. The so-called owner asks for a deposit, typically \$500 - \$1,000, plus first month's rent. You are asked to fill out an application form that is part of an email. (Take care! Identity theft! No legitimate business would ask for personal information such as social security numbers, date and year of birth or bank account information via email.) You are asked to wire or mail a check that is routed through England. Per their instructions, once they have confirmed payment, they will send you the keys and documents for signature. It goes without saying that no documents or keys are forthcoming.

These white collar criminals have even gone as far as finding out the name of the REALTOR who has the home listed then creating an email address that includes the REALTOR's name to give credibility to the scam.

Shawn Buryska, President of the Southeast Minnesota Association of REALTORS, warns: "If it seems too good to be true, do your research. Contact the REALTOR to see if the home is for rent. A \$250,000 home is not going to rent for \$800 per month. We are concerned that folks in our community are being scammed out of hundreds of dollars." REALTORS continue to be vigilant to protect their clients and their communities, but it's important that the public be aware of the issue.

What can you do if you see one of these ads or have been scammed by this network of international criminals? First of all, contact the REALTOR if you see a sign in the yard. Then call the police. Whatever you do, don't send money until you have verified that the rental offer is legitimate.

You have additional options through the following websites:

The FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center: <http://www.ic3.gov/complaint/default.aspx>

To report scams in Minnesota, email report@mnscams.org.