

BUSINESSSAFE

BusinessSafe is designed to aid businesses in protecting the safety and well-being of Florida's residents and visitors from threats. BusinessSafe provides private sector partners with open source information, analysis and resources to help protect their businesses and communities.

Florida Fusion Center 20-130

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BusinessSafe Threat Topic: COVID-19 Related Scams

Since January 2020, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) reported receiving over 18,000 fraud reports referencing the COVID-19 outbreak, and over \$13 million lost to fraud through mid-April. Scams on the rise include charity scams, puppy scams, and apartment/home rental scams. For more information on additional scams not included in this document please, visit the [FTC Explore Data website](#).

Charity scams are common following natural disasters or public health crises to include the current COVID-19 outbreak. Charity scammers often mimic legitimate philanthropic organizations but may also create fraudulent fundraisers in which collected funds aren't used for the advertised purpose. Once donations are received, the money goes directly to the criminal actors and not to intended recipients. To check if a charitable organization is legitimate, visit the [Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Check-A-Charity search](#).

- In March 2020, a South Florida man created a GoFundMe page claiming he was raising \$2,000 to buy masks for first responders amid the COVID-19 outbreak. Instead, he used profits from the fund to buy and sell masks while keeping the profits.
[Florida Attorney General Warns of Donation Scams Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak](#)

Pet scams are common but have increased amid the COVID-19 outbreak as more people work and attend school from home. The increased time spent at home may lead some to look for furry companions. Criminal actors may take advantage of this increased interest in pets to conduct pet scams. The majority of pet scams begin with the buyer browsing the internet for "free/cheap pets for sale". These actors will usually insist on communicating through email or text message and request payment up-front for the pet through wire transfer, money card, or electronic payment apps like Venmo or Cash App. Once payment is received, the scammer disappears. Some scammers are requiring additional costs after purchasing the non-existent pet, to crate and ship them, because people are very likely unable to travel amid the outbreak.

- In April 2020, a Florida family responded to a puppy ad on Craigslist. The seller would not let the family communicate with them via telephone and required them to pay half the cost of the puppy up front. The family grew suspicious and backed out of the sale.
[Better Business Bureau Warns Puppy Scams Can Happen to Anyone](#)



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Home and apartment scams, also known as rental scams, are likely increasing amid the COVID-19 outbreak as scammers attempt to rent out unavailable homes. These scams may involve the hijacking of legitimate rental ads by scammers, advertising properties that don't exist, or advertising properties that aren't livable (spaces may be occupied, foreclosed, or destroyed). These scams have likely increased surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak as scammers exploit social distancing guidelines as a reason for not being able to meet interested parties in person.

- In April 2019, a Florida traveling nurse was a victim of a rental scam when she arrived at the property she thought she rented online. Upon arrival, she discovered the property was occupied. She lost over \$2,000 in this scam.
[Scammer Took Advantage of Nurse Helping Victims Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak](#)
- In April 2020, a healthcare worker in Jacksonville, Florida, was a victim of a rental property scam after viewing a property with a sign in the yard, key pad, and a lock box. The scammer asked the woman to make a payment via payment apps or cryptocurrency.
[Pandemic Has Not Slowed Rental Property Scams in Jacksonville, Florida](#)

Tips to Protect Yourself from COVID-19 Related Scams:

- **Verify that the organization or entity you are donating to is legitimate.** If you are unable to locate your entity on the FDACS Check-A-Charity search, visit the [National Association Attorney General's website](#). If you do believe you have donated to a fraudulent charity, claims can be reported to [FDACS online](#) or via a phone call to FDACS at 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352).
- **Be cautious when buying from online sellers.** Take advice from local friends, families, and shelters of reputable places to purchase puppies. Also, avoid paying in ways that cannot be traced, and be cautious of sellers who rush you into purchases.
- **Rent from reliable entities:** To avoid being a victim of rental scams, pay close attention to prices that seem too good to be true, misspellings in advertisements, and actors asking for a deposit before you sign a lease. Also remember to do research on the property and owner/landlord and check if the same advertisement is being shared in surrounding areas as they may be of a fraudulent advertisement. Report suspected scams to your local law enforcement agency and to the [FTC](#).



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