

DISASTER SCAMS

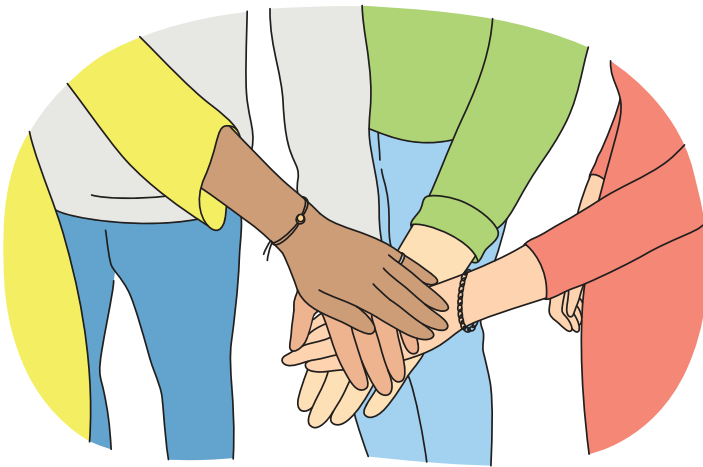
How to spot, avoid and report scams after a disaster

A collaborative resource guide provided by



A natural disaster is devastating. Fires, floods and other extreme events can leave destruction in their paths – tearing through homes and uprooting lives. Unfortunately, not everyone who rushes in after a disaster is there to help. Scammers, including fly-by-night, unlicensed contractors, government imposters and door-to-door scam artists make their living off the misfortunes of others.

To help you avoid falling victim to a scam as you recover and rebuild, the State of Oregon’s Department of Justice, Department of Consumer and Business Services, and the Construction Contractors Board put this resource guide together. We’re all in this together, so please share it with your neighbors, friends and family. The more people know, the more scams we can prevent from happening!



Where to begin

You will face many challenges after a loss. Follow these three steps after a disaster.

Start with your insurance company

Contact your insurance company immediately to report your loss, and follow their instructions.

Ask questions if you do not understand your insurance company's instructions. Find out what is covered in your policy **BEFORE** you hire anyone to work on your property.

Take pictures to document the damage, then make temporary repairs, such as boarding up windows or tarping the roof, to prevent further damage. Use good judgment and care to prevent further loss to your property. Insurance policies may not cover damage that happens later as a result of not addressing issues.

Follow your insurance company's instructions. Do not make any permanent repairs or throw away damaged property until the insurance company confirms that you can.



WE ARE HERE TO HELP

If you still have questions or concerns after speaking with your insurance company, call the Oregon Division of Financial Regulation (DFR). Free help is available from the division's consumer advocates. Call **888-877-4894** (toll-free) or visit dfr.oregon.gov/help.



How to spot a scammer

The Oregon Attorney General wants to remind you to look out for these common signs of a scam:

Scammers...

... **contact you out of the blue.** It could be a knock on the door, a phone call or a piece of mail you weren't expecting. For example, you didn't think you owed FEMA money, but they called claiming you could be in trouble if you don't pay.

... **claim there is an emergency or urgent action is required.** A scammer might warn that if you don't respond immediately, your disaster relief funds may be in jeopardy or your insurance payments will be lost. If someone prompts immediate action, be cautious.

... **ask for your personal information.** Scammers often pose as bank staff, health care providers or government officials asking for personal or financial information. Be suspicious any time someone asks for this information.

... **want you to wire money, pay in cash or purchase prepaid debit cards.** Scammers may also request that you make out the check to an individual instead of the business name. This is the easiest way for scam artists to get their hands on your money, and it's almost impossible to get it back once it has been sent.

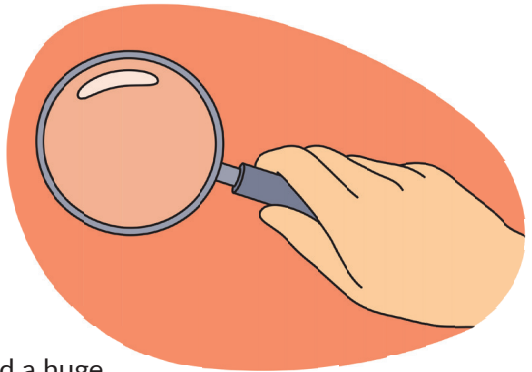
... **tell you to keep it secret.** By asking you to keep a transaction secret, scammers know you won't have to respond to questions from family and friends who might see through the scam. Check with someone you trust before acting.

... **make it sound too good to be true.** If it seems too good to be true, it probably is! Above all, use this simple mantra to help you detect and avoid scams: "It's always better to be cautious than to be a victim." Legitimate companies and government officials don't mind your skepticism; they would rather you be cautious.



Safe or scam? Let's find out.

Following a disaster, there are several types of people you may find yourself interacting with. Review these tips to make sure you are working with legitimate, licensed professionals.



1. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has reported a huge increase in government imposter scams. True government officials will not mind if you are suspicious.

Real government officials...

... **do not text, call or email out of the blue.** Usually, initial contact will be in letter form delivered by U.S. mail or in person.

... **may come door to door after a disaster, but will always have government ID.** Ask to see it. If you sense anything suspicious, call their agency and speak to their supervisor to confirm their identity.

... **will not ask for bank account information** or require a fee to access relief programs.

Typical Government Imposter Scams

- ❌ Someone posing as a government official says you must pay a “processing fee” to get disaster relief.
- ❌ A government imposter says they have a check for you to deposit into your account. Once deposited, they say you have been overpaid and need to pay them back.
- ❌ A phony safety inspector or asbestos tester tells you to pay for tests or make expensive or unneeded repairs immediately.
- ❌ Someone posing as an official wants you to pay cash, by wire transfer or prepaid debit card.

Remember, the government will not do any of these things!

2. BUSINESSES

Check out the business before you buy. Call the Oregon Department of Justice at **877-877-9392** (toll-free) or search its online database of consumer complaints at oregonconsumer.gov.

3. PUBLIC ADJUSTERS

A public adjuster is an independent insurance professional you may hire to help settle an insurance claim.

Your insurance company will provide an adjuster to handle your claim. Work with your assigned adjuster and ask questions to understand the claim process. If you work directly with your insurer, you may still hire a third-party professional (public adjuster or lawyer) to help you. Make sure they are licensed in Oregon. Visit dfr.oregon.gov/help or call **888-877-4894** (toll-free) to check the status of their license.

Before hiring a public adjuster, check out the Division of Financial Regulation's "Four questions to ask before hiring a public adjuster" at dfr.oregon.gov/insure/home/storm/Documents/public-adjuster-questions.pdf.

4. LAWYERS

You may decide you need help from a lawyer. The Oregon State Bar (OSB) provides a referral service for lawyers who are in good standing with the bar, have no current disciplinary proceedings pending, carry malpractice insurance and agree to abide by the OSB customer service standards. For a referral, you can fill out an online request at osbar.org/public/ris/lrsform.html or call **503-684-3763** or toll free in Oregon **800-452-7636**.

5. LANDSCAPE CONTRACTORS

Many disasters require tree removal or other landscape work. When choosing a landscape contractor, follow the same tips that apply to construction contractors. (See page 6.) Landscape contractors are licensed with the Oregon Landscape Contractors Board (LCB). You can check a contractor's LCB license at <https://lcb.us.thentiacloud.net/webs/lcb/register/> or call **503-967-6291**.

6. BUILDING CONTRACTORS

If you need to have your home repaired or rebuilt, don't rush to hire a contractor. Performing repairs and rebuilding right the first time can save you a lot of frustration and money in the end. Your best strategy is to work closely with your insurance company and only work with licensed contractors.

Follow these tips from the Construction Contractors Board (CCB) to hire the right contractor.

- ✓ Get detailed bids from three licensed contractors.
- ✓ Verify that the contractor's license is active and check their complaint history at search.ccb.state.or.us/search or call **503-378-4621**.
- ✓ Ask for and check references. Look for online reviews with pictures of other jobs the contractor has completed.
- ✓ The best contractor may not be the contractor with the lowest bid. Ask yourself:



Do I trust this person?

Do they understand my expectations?

For more information, check out the CCB's Guide to Selecting and Working with a Contractor at oregon.gov/ccb/Documents/pdf/Education/consumer-guide.pdf or call **503-934-2227** to order a paper copy.



SCAMMER BEHAVIORS

- They want to start work on the spot, making you feel pressured.
- Someone randomly shows up at your door or calls you with an offer.
- Their vehicles have out-of-state plates and they work out of a parking lot or hotel.
- They avoid giving you a written estimate and contract, or they demand a lot of money up front.
- The price seems too good to be true.

Tips for hiring a contractor

THE CONTRACT

After you've done your homework and worked closely with your insurance company, it's time to hire a contractor. A carefully written contract will help as your project progresses. Take the time to review some of the important elements of a contract. It should include:



- ✓ Budgeted amount and allowance items. An allowance is an amount allocated to buy items not yet selected. When these items (such as light fixtures) exceed the allowance, the homeowner pays the additional amount.
- ✓ Materials to be used, including quantity, quality, color, size, brand names, etc.
- ✓ A list of permits and who will get them.
- ✓ A payment schedule. Agree in advance to a payment schedule that coincides with work completed. Don't pay for everything up front.
- ✓ An agreement that all change orders will be signed by the contractor and the homeowner. The change will include who is responsible for any additional cost.
- ✓ Copies of the three CCB-required residential construction notices.
- ✓ Start and completion dates.
- ✓ Contractor's name, contact information and CCB number.

PAYING THE CONTRACTOR

When the job starts, only pay the minimum required as a deposit. The contractor will need funds to purchase materials and pay their workers. You may be making multiple scheduled payments as the job progresses. Make sure you retain funds until they have fully completed the job. All this should be spelled out in your contract.

Avoid cash, wire transfers and prepaid debit cards. Always pay by check or credit card. This gives you a receipt of the payment and allows you the option of disputing the charge or stopping payment on the check.

Typical Contractor Scams

Be on the lookout for scams like these, and be suspicious if you're approached by:

THE DIRTY CLEANUP

Be cautious of anyone promising immediate cleanup and debris removal. Some may quote outrageous prices or demand payment up front. In some disasters, cleanup will be coordinated with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), state and local officials. Check with your local jurisdiction about programs that may pay for the cleanup before you hire anyone.

THE ROOFING RIP-OFF

Scammers might say you have loose shingles, then after some hammering and superficial changes, charge several thousand dollars. Or, they may say they installed your roof years ago and have returned to perform upkeep. They may also offer to clean your gutters, then find "problems."

THE DRIVEWAY DECEIT

Scammers demand a big payment up front and lay down a little pavement sealant before taking off with your money. The thin pavement then cracks, leaving you with a crumbling driveway. Often, they quote a low price because they have "leftover materials" or they are already working in your area.

THE "FREE" INSPECTION

Scammers offer a "free inspection" because they happen to be in your area. Once in the door, they find "urgent" work to be done.

THE BAIT AND SWIPE

One person leads you away to show you damage on your home while the other slips into the home to steal valuables. Or, someone asks to use your bathroom, then steals medications or valuables.

Reporting scams and fraud

The only way to stop scammers is to report them. It is common for people to feel shame about being the victim of a scam, but the reality is that anyone can be a victim. Scammers are good at what they do – that’s why they do it. Report it, and warn others.

GOVERNMENT IMPOSTERS

If you are contacted by a government imposter, immediately report it to the agency being misrepresented. After a disaster, it’s common to run into imposters claiming they’re with FEMA, the Small Business Administration or the Environmental Protection Agency. Report this kind of activity to the FEMA Disaster Fraud Hotline at **866-720-5721** (toll-free) and your local police.

In general, if you get a call from a government imposter, file a complaint at **reportfraud.ftc.gov**. Be sure to include: when it happened; name of the government agency the imposter used; and as many details as you can, including their phone number.

PRICE GOUGING

Do not pay excessive prices for essential goods, such as bottled water. If you think you have been the victim of price gouging, file a complaint with the Oregon Department of Justice by calling **877-877-9392** (toll-free) or visiting **oregonconsumer.gov**.

For more information on price gouging, see **doj.state.or.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/price_gouging_handout.pdf**.

CHARITY SCAMS

Avoid disaster-related charity scams. Scammers will often try to make a quick profit from the misfortune of others. Check out the Oregon Department of Justice’s advice on donating wisely online at **oregonconsumer.gov**.

RENTAL LISTING SCAMS

Steer clear of people who tell you to wire money or ask for security deposits or rent before you have met or signed a lease.

INVESTMENT SCAMS

Disasters are followed by recovery responses that may generate investment scams, such as bogus real estate schemes after a wildfire. If you suspect an investment is fishy, contact the Division of Financial Regulation consumer advocates. Call **888-877-4894** (toll-free), email **dfr.financialserviceshelp@oregon.gov**, or visit **dfr.oregon.gov** to file a complaint.

Get more tips to avoid investment fraud at **dfr.oregon.gov/financial/protect/Pages/avoid-investment-fraud.aspx**.

CONSUMER SCAMS

The Oregon Department of Justice is committed to ensuring a fair and safe marketplace. If you feel you've been taken advantage of, there are steps you can take — both online and on the phone. File a complaint and learn more about the process at **oregonconsumer.gov** or call **877-877-9392** (toll-free).

CONSTRUCTION SCAMS

If you suspect a construction scam, get the person's name and business address, CCB license number, phone number and vehicle license plate. Report the incident to the police before they leave. Also, report to the Construction Contractors Board at **503-378-4621**.

DO NOT CALL VIOLATION

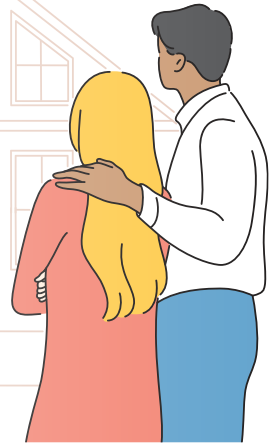
One of the best ways to reduce telemarketer calls is to register with the FTC Do Not Call Registry at **donotcall.gov**. Then, if a telemarketer does call you, be sure to report a Do Not Call Violation.



Recovering from scams

Recovering from a scam, fraud or financial exploitation is a unique journey for each victim. Remember, being the victim of a scam or fraud is not your fault. Anyone can be scammed. Get help from a trusted professional, friend or family member to recover.

Get resources to help at dfr.oregon.gov/financial/protect/Pages/recovery.aspx



Consumer hotlines

Construction Contractors Board: 503-378-4621, oregon.gov/ccb

Oregon Department of Justice: 877-877-9392

The Attorney General's Consumer Complaint Hotline is open M-F from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and is staffed by dedicated volunteers who field over 50,000 calls each year.

Oregon Division of Financial Regulation: 888-877-4894

*Licensing, insurance and financial services questions
Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.*

JOIN THE SCAM ALERT NETWORK Visit oregonconsumer.gov to sign up for consumer alerts from the Oregon Department of Justice.



Information current as of August 2021. Please visit OregonConsumer.Gov for updates.