

# OFFICE OF CONSUMER PROTECTION

Can You Spot a Utility Scam?

May 26, 2020

Making ends meet can be very daunting as COVID-19 impacts already strained household finances. Unfortunately, scammers never rest and will take advantage of the current situation to swindle homeowners. Below are tips to help you avoid falling prey.

## Utility Cutoff Phone Scam

Scammers may use a myriad of methods in order to defraud homeowners. One of the most rampant methods is the "Utility Cutoff Phone Scam." This scam entails someone posing as a representative from a utility company calling to tell you that your utility or water will be turned off immediately. Legitimate utility company representatives will NEVER ask a homeowner for immediate payment via gift card, wire transfer, or cash app. Nor would they threaten to interrupt service immediately.



A warning that you are talking to a scammer would be if they demanded your social security number or account number. Remember that this person called *you* and should already have your account information and do not need your



*Ensuring Integrity in  
our Marketplace*



If you have been a victim of a scam, or if you have any questions about a merchant's activities, please contact the Office of Consumer Protection.

100 Maryland Avenue  
Suite 3600  
Rockville, MD 20850  
Main: 240.777.3636  
Tip Line: 240.777.3681  
Fax: 240.777.3768

You can also file a complaint online by clicking [HERE](#)



SSN for verification. Keep calm no matter how clever or threatening the caller is on the other end and never provide them with any of your personal information.

A twist on the utility cut-off scam is the utility discount scam. The caller offers a discount on your monthly bill if you provide a credit or debit card. There is no discount, just the theft of your bank account information.

So, what's the best action to take? Simply hang up, then contact your utility provider from the number *you find* on your bill or online in order to verify any issues with your account. Scammers will provide you a number to their colleagues. The Federal Trade Commission has more information on how you can [Empower Yourself Against Utility Scams](#)

### **✚ Slamming (Switching Energy Supply Companies)**

“Slamming” is the practice of switching your electric or gas supplier without your consent and is another favorite of scammers. So, you wonder how scammers are able to switch your energy supplier? Remember Maryland is a choice state, so you can choose a different energy supplier. So for electricity, you might choose the default supplier or switch to solar, wind or other energy source. No matter the supplier of electricity, your utility (PEPCO, BGE or Potomac Edison Company) would still deliver the energy, respond to emergencies, and send your bills. Here’s where the scammers come in.



Legally, a salesperson comes to your door, or calls you on the phone, to ask if you want to switch energy suppliers and pitches their product or claims to have a better rate than your current supplier. Scammers might not take no for an answer and switch your supplier anyway. They may claim to be “from your utility company” or “the government” and ask for your account number or ask to see your bill in order to determine if you are eligible for refunds or discounts. Your bill has your account number which is how they make the switch.

Absolutely, under no circumstances show these individuals a copy of your bill or give them your account number. In some instances, the person at your door may try and create a sense of urgency or even threaten not to leave your property until she’s seen your bill. This is your home so you can simply close your door.

If at a later time, you decide to change your supplier company, do your homework and research which company will be the best fit for you. The [Montgomery Energy Connection](#) website can help you research programs and options on your energy consumption.

The [AARP](#) has more information regarding this slamming scam on its website. If you have questions about who your electricity supplier is, please contact [your utility](#). In Montgomery County, that could be Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO), Baltimore Gas and Electric (BGE), or Potomac Edison Company.

The [Maryland Public Service Commission](#) (PSC) also has a [website](#) where consumers can shop and compare offers from different energy suppliers for electricity. The PSC website [explains](#) how you can change from one retail electricity supplier to another. Only the new electricity supplier you choose can switch your service from your current provider.

The PSC website also has information about consumers’ rights and it contains a list of all licensed suppliers and utilities with their contact

information. It also has links to the PSC's online complaint portal. The PSC expects to launch a companion site for natural gas shoppers soon.

### **Water Filter Scam**

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, scammers would prey on homeowners' fears of the effect chemicals, minerals, and diseases on their water safety and security. These criminals posed as a representative from the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) or the WSSC and come to your home. They inform you that your water is contaminated after conducting "tests" or leaving behind a "free survey" for you to perform. No matter how you respond the "test" results will result in the scammers telling you that your water is contaminated. These scammers, posing as government agencies, then would suggest consumers purchase [expensive water purification equipment](#) to keep their family safe.



Bottom line never trust someone making claims such as these. In this area, WSSC ensures the quality of our drinking water. It has repeatedly stated that drinking water is not the droplets consumers should worry about with the COVID-19. If you ever have any doubts about your water quality, call the WSSC. Both the [Baltimore City's Department of Public Works](#) and WSSC [caution](#) residents about this scam.

### **Home Energy Audit Scam**

As the [Department of Energy](#) notes, home energy audits can save you money and

improve the comfort of your home. Similar to how scammers approach homeowners in utility switching, someone posing as a utility worker or a reputable business comes to your door offering a free home energy audit. Within a short period of time, the individual at your door will begin a sales pitch on how wonderful their product or service is. One way to counter these scammers is to be as direct as possible and request to see proof of employment or ID as well as their required door to door salesman's license.

Scammer will be reluctant or unwilling to produce these forms of identification. If the salesman cannot verify who they work for or the employer identification does not match up with what they have told you, then chances are they are a fraud. So, what's the best way to deal with a fraud? By closing the door then confirming with your utility or supplier and inquire if they had contractors in your area. Two examples of legitimate home energy audit firms would be the EmPOWER Maryland program offering [Quick Home Energy Checkups](#) at no cost and Home Energy Audits for \$100. EmPOWER Maryland will not usually come door to door and they do not do robocalls. Call your utility to learn more about those programs. The [AARP](#) provides further information on this scam.

### **Questions on Energy Use?**

If you have any questions about energy efficiency, availability of programs, alternative energy options, or simply need assistance lowering your bill, you can research your options at [Montgomery Energy Connection](#).

