



John A. Carey
Inspector General

OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL PALM BEACH COUNTY

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Be Wary of Scammers Selling Fake Documents to Exploit Public Assistance Programs

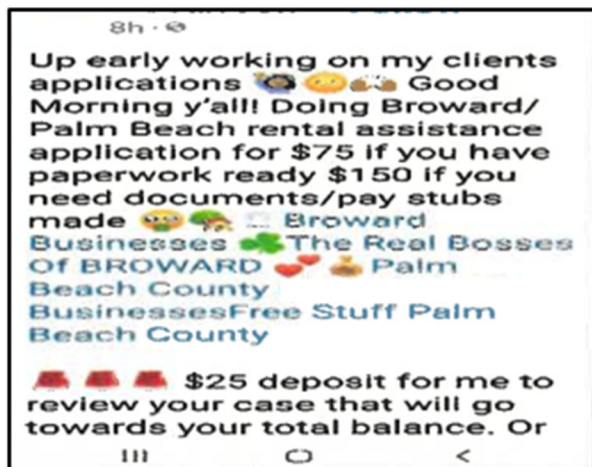
Fraudsters are using Social Media Platforms to Market, Sell, and Distribute Fake Documents to Defraud Government Assistance Programs

Government assistance programs are designed to serve low-income and vulnerable members of the community. Palm Beach County government and municipal entities issue millions of dollars of assistance funding annually for housing, food, utilities, and business support. When those resources are diverted from their intended use, public funds set aside to assist those in need are diminished and taxpayer trust in government's administration of these programs decreases.



Applications for assistance usually require supporting documentation to verify the applicant's identity, confirm that the applicant meets program eligibility requirements, and substantiate the applicant's stated need for assistance and, where applicable, the intended or actual use of the funds. Several Palm Beach County Office of Inspector General's recent investigations identified an emerging method used to facilitate fraud against the government. Multiple Palm Beach County residents have advertised on publicly accessible social media accounts that they could create and/or submit falsified supporting documents for government assistance applications for a fee. These individuals advertised on commonly used social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, and often accepted payment

Actual social media advertisement of an individual investigated by Office of Inspector General



“Enhancing Public Trust in Government”

from applicants using cash or peer-to-peer financial services platforms such as Venmo, Zelle, or Cash App.

Our office found subjects that offered services to Individuals to create pay stubs, rental leases, Social Security benefit statements, loss of employment letters, and utility bills.

We obtained evidence showing hundreds of assistance applications submitted to the County originated from common internet protocol (IP) addresses. Other red flags found in fraudulent applications include the use of identical supporting documentation for unrelated applications; incorrect logos or missing employer contact information; similar misspellings, mismatched dates, formatting or spacing issues, and/or typographical and grammatical errors; and information inconsistent with publicly available government databases.

Government can take steps to detect fraudulent assistance applications and avoid diverting public resources to fund them

Look for irregular Internet Protocol (IP) addresses

Social media solicitations often advertise the ability to create and/or submit fraudulent applications on behalf of applicants. Collecting and reviewing IP data could alert the government to multiple submissions from the same IP address and flag those applications for closer review.

Independently verify supporting documents

Verify the personal identifiers on each supporting document, contact listed references and employers, and compare the documents against property ownership records and address databases to help detect fraudulent supporting documentation.

Work with the OIG

Government entities should promptly notify the Office of Inspector General upon discovering suspicious applications or social media solicitations and, where criminal activity is suspected, contact appropriate law enforcement. Early reporting may help agencies access investigative resources, better understand fraudulent methods, and respond before additional public funds are put at risk.

Monitor social media, or request tips for fraudulent supporting document providers

As appropriate, monitoring commonly used social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook for fraud solicitations in your area can yield information that helps expose perpetrators. A well-monitored tip line (our OIG Hotline is 877-OIG-TIPS) can help identify potential fraudsters. Check with government counsel to establish ground rules for discovering and monitoring potential fraudsters.