



*State of North Carolina
General Court of Justice
Prosecutorial District Three B*

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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DISTRICT ATTORNEY THOMAS INFORMS RESIDENTS, WARNS SCAMMERS

New Bern, North Carolina – District Attorney Scott Thomas is warning all residents of Carteret, Craven, and Pamlico Counties to be wary of a variety of crimes that are typically committed following a major catastrophe, such as Hurricane Florence, and to report any and all such crimes as soon as possible.

District Attorney Scott Thomas said, "Following a major event such as the damage done by Hurricane Florence, we typically see most residents – friends, neighbors, even complete strangers – band together and lend a helping hand toward recovery. However, experience has also taught that there are predators who commit, and try to commit, despicable crimes to scam vulnerable people out of their money. My prayers are with our neighbors who have suffered as a result of Hurricane Florence. After each of these tragic storm events, we emerge, as a community, stronger and closer together. We will work through the aftermath of Florence and move forward in a positive direction. Unfortunately, after major storms in our prosecutorial district of Carteret, Craven and Pamlico Counties, scammers show up to commit crimes. In the past, we have prosecuted these criminals -- and we will do so again. If you become a victim of a scammer, file a complaint with your local law enforcement agency immediately so it can be investigated and reviewed for prosecution. Scammers are put on notice that their conduct will not be tolerated in our district. They will be investigated, charged with the most serious provable offense, and prosecuted vigorously."

One of the most common crimes committed following a storm is fraud committed by so-called contractors who offer a range of services, from tree cutting and removal, to home repairs, to paving and masonry work. Often, these persons are unlicensed, and while they have a good sales pitch, they are only looking to steal. Once they get a "downpayment," they quickly cash the check, and flee that neighborhood, moving on to the next possible victim. No reputable contractor should require payment up front to purchase materials for any construction project. Homeowners should always check the background of a contractor before entering into any agreement, written or otherwise, to

work on their home. Warning signs of a possible scam include: pressure to pay up front; pressure to pay in cash rather than by check or credit card; a lack of a North Carolina phone number, office, or work location; an obvious lack of tools, equipment, or manpower to undertake the job; a lack of references in this area; and a lack of a license issued by the North Carolina Licensing Board for General Contractors (www.nclbnc.org). When in doubt, do not pay. There are plenty of honest, hard-working contractors in our three counties to hire and trust. Often, a simple check of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety's site will uncover prior criminal records: <https://webapps.doc.state.nc.us/opi/offendersearch.do?method=view>.

These kinds of cases usually result in felony criminal charges of Obtaining Property by False Pretense, and, depending on the circumstances, Exploitation of the Elderly or Disabled. Even attempting to get money by misrepresentation is a felony, and can result in prison sentences. Depending on the amount involved, the criminal can face mandatory prison sentences. The District Attorney's Office will also explore every possible aggravating factor in order to increase those prison sentences.

District Attorney Scott Thomas added, "In order to solve these cases and successfully bring charges, we need all homeowners to pay careful attention, and make notes – not just of the person's name and business name, but the business phone numbers, the make and model of any vehicles on your property, the license plate numbers for those vehicles, and copies of any forms of payment you make. Without this information, often law enforcement cannot find the person who defrauded the homeowner, and they are able to escape justice. Keep all contracts, estimates, business cards, and other paperwork, and take plenty of photographs – not just of the damage to be repaired, but of the people who come to your house to perform work, and their vehicles. If they are nervous about your taking pictures, tell them to leave and not come back."

Charities in our area perform amazing and under-appreciated work following natural disasters such as hurricanes; however, sometimes unscrupulous people will pose as representatives for charities, and seek donations of cash or property (clothing, furniture, even vehicles) while intending to simply steal these items. Before making any charitable donations, take the time to confirm that the charity is a reputable one, and that your donation is going directly to the charity. Sites such as www.charitywatch.org, and www.give.org have done background work on charities and provide reliable information whether to trust them with your donations. Again, if you suspect fraud involving someone soliciting contributions, report it immediately to your local law enforcement agency.

Reports of scams and frauds should not be made using the 911 system. Please only use 911 when an emergency situation exists and needs immediate response. In all other cases, call your law enforcement agency's non-emergency number to make a report. An officer will respond, and often a detective or investigator will then continue the investigation. These non-emergency numbers include:

Carteret County Sheriff: (252) 728-8400

Morehead City Police:	(252) 726-5361
Newport Police:	(252) 223-5410
Emerald Isle Police:	(252) 354-2021
Pine Knoll Shores Police:	(252) 247-2474
Atlantic Beach Police:	(252) 726-2523
Cape Carteret Police:	(252) 393-2183
Craven County Sheriff:	(252) 636-6620
New Bern Police:	(252) 672-4100
Havelock Police:	(252) 447-3212
Trent Woods Police:	(252) 637-3030
River Bend Police:	(252) 638-1108
Vanceboro Police:	(252) 244-0440
Bridgeton Police:	(252) 637-2033
Pamlico County Sheriff:	(252) 745-3101
Oriental Police:	(252) 249-0369

Another common report made after hurricanes and other catastrophes is that of price gouging. The North Carolina Attorney General’s Office notes the following:

North Carolina’s price gouging law is usually triggered when the state suffers or is threatened by a natural disaster such as a hurricane, tornado, winter storm, or flooding. Price gouging—or charging too much in times of crisis—is against North Carolina law when a disaster, an emergency or an abnormal market disruption for critical goods and services is declared or proclaimed by the Governor or a municipality. **The price gouging law is currently in effect for the state of North Carolina after a State of Emergency was declared on September 7, 2018 related to Hurricane Florence.** Under the law, the Attorney General’s Office can put a stop to price gouging and seek refunds for consumers who paid too much. The courts may also impose civil penalties against price gougers of up to \$5,000 for each violation.

If you suspect an instance of price gouging, report it immediately using the Attorney General’s online form available here: <https://www.ncdoj.gov/Consumer/2-2-12-File-a-Complaint/Price-Gouging-Complaint.aspx>.

Occasionally, there also appear some claims of insurance fraud following a storm such as Hurricane Florence. If you suspect any kind of insurance fraud, you may report it to the North Carolina Department of Insurance by email at reportfraud@ncdoi.gov, or by calling 1-888-680-7684.

District Attorney Scott Thomas concluded, “My first concern is, obviously, for the well-being of everyone in Carteret, Craven, and Pamlico Counties, and I hope that all residents take proper precautions for their own safety. I urge everyone in the coming weeks to be vigilant about possible scams, and to err on the side of caution and call the police if you have suspicions of improper or criminal behavior. As always, report emergencies to 911, and gather as much information as possible to help us prosecute these criminals.”

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