

Beware of Utility Scams

As temperatures drop, watch out for these seasonal hoaxes

by Sid Kirchheimer, AARP

The Shutoff Swindle

In the most common utility con, which happens every winter and during peak air-conditioning season, customers get phone calls warning that their service is about to be shut off because of unpaid bills.

The callers claim to be billing representatives from your utility company, but are actually crooks looking for a quick payoff. They tell you that to avoid an immediate shutoff, you need to settle an overdue bill by providing them with your credit card number or a prepaid debit card.

In recent weeks, utility customers from Connecticut to Hawaii have been targeted in this longtime scheme. But this winter, some utility impostors have been demanding payment for several months' worth of purported unpaid utility service, not just one, as had been the custom. They can be convincing. They may use "spoofing" software that lets them falsely display the name and phone number of your utility company on your Caller ID. But you should know that most utilities will mail at least one past-due notice before terminating service. If you get a cancellation notification (especially by phone), always verify it by dialing the customer service number on your utility bill. Don't give any information to the caller.

Inspection Deception

Now is when utility company impostors or independent "energy auditors" tend to appear unannounced at your front door, offering a free inspection of your furnace and thermostat, or a free evaluation of your home's energy leakage. But unless your utility company has notified you in advance or you initiated a request for an audit or inspection, don't let them in.

Assume that unsolicited energy auditors are really salesmen or home improvement hucksters pitching unnecessary expensive products, such as a \$4,000 "solar" blanket for the attic that in fact can't live up to its claimed ability to capture the sun's rays through roofing materials. Maybe that's why the Consumer Federation of America cited "free energy audits" as a burgeoning problem in its most recent top consumer complaints list.

Often, self-described inspectors are actually there for a quick burglary — especially if they arrive in pairs. One distracts you while the other scoops up valuables. Or they may be trying to collect your personal information for identity theft. Don't be fooled if inspectors sport official-looking badges (which can be printed from a computer) or wear uniforms (which can be rented or stolen). Unless you expect any energy-related experts, keep your door locked.

Sid Kirchheimer is the author of Scam-Proof Your Life, published by AARP Books.