

Beware of Scams

Most Americans don't realize that they are financially liable when they fall for scams. The best thing our citizens can do to protect themselves is to learn how to avoid these scams. The old adage still holds true: *"If someone offers you a deal that sounds too good to be true, it probably is."*

Before you cash any checks, respond to any emails or return any calls—ask a trusted friend to review it for you or bring the correspondence to your local bank for further clarification. Chances are the offer is a scam and the goal of each scam to steal your hard-earned dollars.

Scams that involve counterfeit checks, gift checks, travelers checks or money orders have become increasingly popular and are targeting virtually every American primarily through email, but also via U.S. Mail and phone solicitations. These schemes include:

The six most popular scams are:

- **Foreign Business Offers:** Scammers pretend to be businesspeople or government officials and promise millions of dollars. Real companies and government agencies don't offer legitimate business propositions to people they don't know.
- **Love Losses:** The scammer poses as a romantic interest online, and promises to come to the U.S. to be with the victim. Soon after, the online friend asks the victim to cash a check or money order to cover "travel expenses."
- **Overpayments:** Scammers buy merchandise online, and then claim they mailed the wrong amount by mistake. The seller is asked to deposit the "wrong" check anyway, and then return the "excess" amount to the scammer. But the check doesn't clear, and the victim has sent the scammer his own money.
- **Rental Schemes:** Scammers claim to be moving to the area, and put down a rental deposit. Then they tell their landlord they have unexpected expenses, so they ask for some of their deposit back as a favor. They never move in, and the deposit check never clears.
- **Sudden Riches:** The scammer claims the victim has won a foreign lottery or sweepstakes. The notice comes by mail, phone, fax or email. Consumers should know that winners of real cash prizes are notified by certified mail.
- **Work-at-Home:** The scams promise easy money by "processing" checks. The victim deposits the checks and sends the money to the scammer, minus a small fee. Legitimate companies don't do business like this. (Secret Shoppers)

More than 540,000 fake checks worth over \$2.1 billion were seized through the global counterfeit initiative between January and August 2007.

The United States Postal Inspection Service, in collaboration with financial institutions, consumer advocacy groups and businesses, has formed the Alliance for Consumer Fraud Awareness, which has launched a consumer education campaign. A series of television, print and online advertisements will feature a tagline telling consumers: "Scams like these don't work in person." You can learn more about this alliance at <http://fakechecks.org>.