

## Real Estate Scams

The Saskatchewan Real Estate Commission wants to remind all registrants and the public to be cautious when posting and/or answering ads for rental accommodations and property sales, especially online. There is an increasing number of scams being run by individuals who appear to be legitimate at first glance, but who are anything but. Some scammers hijack a real rental or real estate listing by changing the email address or other contact information, and placing the modified ad on another site. The altered ad may even use the name of the person who posted the original ad. In other cases, scammers have hijacked the email accounts of property owners on reputable vacation rental websites.

Scammers often advertise rentals that don't exist or aren't available to trick people into sending money before they find out the truth. Individuals are being contacted from outside of Canada about potential revenue generation from their out-of-country property (most often holiday-use condominiums). Victims are sent counterfeit checks for rental down payments and are either asked to remit any extra money back to the "client", or they find out later that they are responsible to the bank not only for the counterfeit check amount, but also the NSF fees charged by the bank.

In other cases, rental advertising is copied by the scammers and rental deposits are collected from victims who believe they are putting down payments on a rental until someone discovers that the property was not available to be rented. By that time, the scammer is long gone and the victims are out their deposit money.

Another type of scam involves real estate posted via classified ad. Scammers duplicate the ads, altering them slightly, and then repost. When the victim sends an e-mail through the classified advertisement website inquiring about the home, they receive a response from someone claiming to be the owner. The "owner" claims he is currently on missionary work in a foreign country (or is somehow otherwise unavailable personally). Therefore, he needs someone to rent his home while he is away. The victim is asked to send money to the owner in the foreign country.

Other rip-off artists make up listings for places that aren't actually for rent or don't exist, and try to lure you in with the promise of low rent or great amenities. Their goal is to get your money before you find out it's not real.

Being savvy when you're in search of real estate is well worth the effort. Here are some signs you may be dealing with a scam:

### They Tell You to Wire Money

This is the surest sign of a scam. There's never a good reason to wire money to pay a security deposit, application fee, first month's rent, or vacation rental fee. This is true even if they send you a contract first. Wiring money is the same as sending cash; once you send it, you have no way to get it back.

### They Want a Security Deposit or First Month's Rent before You've Met or Signed a Lease

It's never a good idea to send money to someone you've never met in person for an apartment you haven't seen. If you can't visit an apartment or house yourself, ask someone you trust to go and confirm that it's for rent, and that it is what was advertised. In addition to setting up a meeting, do a search on the owner and listing. If you find the same ad listed under a different name, that's a clue it may be a scam.

### They Say They're Out of the Country

But they have a plan to get the keys into your hands. It might involve a lawyer or an "agent" working on their behalf. Some scammers even create fake keys. Don't send money to them overseas. If you can't meet in person, see the apartment, or sign a lease before you pay, keep looking. What if the rental itself is overseas? Paying with a credit card or through a reputable vacation rental website with its own payment system are your safest bets.

If you believe you have been the victim of a real estate scam, report it to your local law enforcement immediately. Though the Commission investigates all officially filed complaints, our jurisdiction is limited with respect to non-registrants.

If you find that one of your real estate listings has been hijacked by an apparent internet scammer, you should take steps to see if you can get the illegitimate advertisement taken down. You can try contacting the person who posted the advertisement and request that they take it down or contact the site that is hosting the advertisement, identify yourself as the real estate agent listing the property for sale, and request that the site take down the fraudulent advertisement. You should also make sure your seller client is aware of the scammer's advertisement.