



What To Do If You've Been Scammed

If you believe you've sent money to a fraudulent account, take the following steps.

01. Contact Your Financial Institution Immediately

Notify your bank or financial institution that you may be a victim of fraud. If funds were sent, ask whether a transfer recall, account freeze or other protective steps are available.

02. Notify your Title Professional or Real Estate Attorney

Call, don't click. Use a verified phone number from a business card or official website. Explain what occurred so they can help stop further activity and alert all parties involved.

03. Report the Crime

File reports with:

- FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3.gov)
- Local law enforcement
- Your state attorney general or real estate regulator

Early reporting increases the likelihood of recovering funds and helps authorities identify and stop future fraud attempts.

How to Protect Yourself

Real estate fraud can happen to anyone, but taking proactive steps can significantly reduce your risk.



Strengthen your digital security:

Use strong, unique passwords for email and financial accounts, enable two-factor authentication, and regularly monitor accounts for suspicious activity.



Monitor your property records:

Sign up for free property or deed monitoring services, where available, to receive alerts if documents are recorded in your name.



Ask questions:

If something seems unusual, contact a trusted title or real estate professional before taking action.

How the Title Industry Helps Protect Consumers

Title and settlement professionals safeguard America's real estate marketplace every day. They help prevent, detect and respond to fraud through:



Verifying identities and confirming rightful property ownership.



Uncovering red flags in public records and transaction behavior.



Educating consumers about safe closing practices.



Using secure systems to transmit wiring instructions.



Providing title insurance, which protects property rights long after the closing.



Working with law enforcement to stop fraudulent activity.

- Some policies, such as the **ALTA Homeowner's Policy** (where approved), offer expanded protections, including coverage for post-policy forgery or fraudulent deed transfers.



Fraud in Real Estate

Seller Impersonation & Deed Fraud

Criminals are increasingly impersonating property owners to illegally sell homes or land they don't own. These schemes often target vacant lots, rental properties, family land and second homes — places where an owner doesn't live full-time and may not notice real estate sales activity right away. Yet, this can just as easily happen to a primary residence, threatening homeowners across the country. Victims can face significant legal fees or other losses associated with the crime.

HOW IT WORKS

- A criminal gathers public data and personal details from online or stolen sources.
- They forge IDs or documents to pose as the legitimate owner.
- They list the property for sale (often below market value to attract buyers quickly).
- They push for a fast closing, using their own notary to avoid scrutiny.
- Once the sale closes, the criminal disappears with the proceeds.

Because homeowners don't often monitor recordings against their properties, or these properties are not owner-occupied, the crimes may not be discovered for months or even years.

COMMON RED FLAGS

- ▶ The property is vacant land or used as a rental, vacation home or investment property.
- ▶ The seller refuses to meet in person or only communicates by email or text.
- ▶ The seller insists on a quick closing, typically within 3 weeks.
- ▶ Contact information or identification documents are inconsistent.
- ▶ The price is well below market value.

CONSUMER TIPS

- Sign up for free property alert notifications, where available in your county, to receive notifications when any document is filed regarding your property.
- If the deal seems too good to be true, ask questions.
- When purchasing property, ask a title professional or real estate attorney about title insurance.
- Consider an ALTA Homeowner's Policy of Title Insurance, where available, which provides protection for both pre-purchase and post-purchase forgery.
- Check with your title company to see if you have fraud coverage included in your title insurance policy. If not, you can add coverage to your policy.



Closing Scams/Wire Fraud

Closing scams are the No. 1 threat in real estate transactions today. Nearly 1 in 4 consumers encounter suspicious or fraudulent communications during closing, and almost 1 in 20 become victims (*2025 State of Wire Fraud, CertifID*). Criminals use email, phone calls, text messages or website forms to trick buyers, sellers or agents into sending closing funds to fraudulent accounts.

HOW IT WORKS

Scammers use business email compromise (BEC) tactics to impersonate a trusted party in the transaction:

- They steal or guess email credentials using phishing emails or spoofed login screens.
- They monitor inboxes to learn the closing timeline.
- At the right moment, they send fake wire instructions that look legitimate, often using the name, logo and email address of the title company, lender or real estate agent.
- Once funds are wired, the money can disappear within minutes.

COMMON RED FLAGS

- ▶ Sudden changes to wiring instructions. **Your title company will never change your closing instructions.**
- ▶ Urgent demands such as, "You must send funds immediately"
- ▶ Messages with misspellings or unfamiliar phone numbers
- ▶ Emails with lookalike domains (e.g., .co instead of .com)

CONSUMER TIPS

- Always verify wire instructions with your title company using a trusted phone number from their website or a business card, not a number listed in the email.
- Never trust emailed changes to wiring instructions.
- Ask your bank to verify the receiving account name and number before sending funds.
- Call your title company within 4 to 8 hours of sending the wire to confirm they received your funds.



Elder Real Estate Fraud & Financial Exploitation

This refers to a broad range of actions that deprive older adults of money, equity or property. These actions may include forging signatures on legal or financial documents, coercing or unduly influencing the signing of documents, failing to disclose critical information or misusing authority under a Power of Attorney (POA). FBI data shows that in 2023 people over 60 lost more than \$65 million to real estate-related scams in a single year, impacting approximately 1,498 victims.

Crimes targeting older adults may be committed by unscrupulous professionals, complete strangers or even family members, trusted friends and advisors. Because these crimes often involve close relationships, many cases go unreported, meaning available data likely understates the true scope of the problem.

THE IMPACT

FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) data shows that people over 60 lost more than \$65 million to real estate-related scams in a single year, impacting approximately 1,498 victims.

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Consumers and policymakers can leverage the following programs and tools to support fraud prevention and public awareness:

- **ALTA Home Closing 101:** Provides consumers with information about buying and selling property.
- **AARP BankSafe Initiative:** Helps the financial industry better meet consumers' financial needs and safeguard their assets.
- **AARP Fraud Watch Network:** Equips consumers with reliable, up-to-date insights, alerts, and fraud prevention resources to help spot and avoid scams.
- **AARP's The Perfect Scam Podcast:** Award-winning podcast that explores real scams from the perspectives of victims and law enforcement.
- **NAR Fraud, Negligence, and Liability:** Offers resources to help real estate professionals and consumers avoid real estate-related fraud scams.

