



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

## **Housing Fraud Prevention Fact Sheet - What Consumers Need to Know**

Savvy fraudsters are using vacant bank-owned and privately-owned residential properties to con unsuspecting rental consumers of their hard-earned money. They often pose as the property owner or an agent on behalf of the property owner. This is not just a problem in Trenton, but one that exists in cities across the country, particularly those areas that have hundreds of vacant properties that are bank-owned as a result of the foreclosure crisis.

This is a serious public policy issue that the **Fraudulent Housing Occupancy Task Force** is working on with local, county and state officials; law enforcement, taxation, housing code enforcement, consumer affairs, etc. to address. We want the public to know that impersonating property owners and squatting in a vacant property are illegal activities that will be investigated and prosecuted.

For residents who are in need of permanent housing, there are myriad services throughout the county and at the city level that are designed to help people find housing. Squatting in someone else's property—privately-owned or bank-owned—is illegal and can also be a significant safety hazard.

If you are a rental consumer, you must be careful to verify rental listings, property ownership, and other information, before you give anyone or any organization money to rent a property, especially to someone claiming to be an agent of the owner. Impersonating an owner or claiming to be an agent of the property owner, are key parts of the scam.

We have had a handful of instances in Trenton where rental consumers have been victims because they did were not aware of the legal requirements, their rights and the resources available, and that is unfortunate and preventable.

In addition, people are recording fraudulent documents like fake deeds or fake liens against property owners. In some instances, fraud on real property may not be discovered until the owners seek to sell the house.

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**Here is what you need to know to prevent being a victim of housing property fraud:**

- **Always verify ownership of a property** that an individual or organization is trying to

rent to you. You can give the city's **Department of Inspections** at **(609) 989-3552** to verify ownership and other information before moving ahead with any rental transaction.

- You can also phone the **Office of Citizens Concerns, at 989-3844**, or **Trenton Police Department** at **(609) 989-4170**, its non-emergency phone number, if you suspect fraud in a real estate rental transaction that you have undertaken. Please be prepared to provide as much substantial information to the police as you are able to assist any investigation.
- **Never give anyone cash.** If a property owner requests cash only as a method of payment, **walk away immediately.**
- **Even if a landlord requests a month-to-month arrangement**, demand that it be memorialized in a written lease that spells out who they are; their business address and phone number; and detailed terms of what you've agreed to.
- **Never rent sight-unseen.** Always visit and inspect what you're interested in renting, and be sure to follow my first two points, if you wish to move forward with any transaction.
- **Meet the landlord or property owner in person** and get a business card.
- **Try talking to previous tenants or to neighbors** who may know the property's history.
- If a landlord or property owner shows little interest in your background— where you work, your income, your length of time at your employer—that's a significant red flag. **Walk away from the transaction.**
- **Protect your property. If you are the owner** of a property, protect yourself with an additional layer of security by registering with the County's new property alert service, which provides property owners with an e-mail alert anytime that a document affecting a specific property is recorded by the Mercer County Clerk's Office. Property owners can sign up now for the [free service by visiting mercercounty.org and clicking on the Property Alert icon to access the Property Alert Service page.](https://www.mercercounty.org) If you have been victimized, you may reach out for assistance and a list of resources available. The phone number is **609-989-6470.**