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Minnesota utilities join first ever national campaign to protect customers from scammers

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MINNEAPOLIS – November 15, 2016 – Gas and electric utility companies across the United States and Canada as well as the [Better Business Bureau of Minnesota \(BBB\)](#) are joining forces to protect customers from long-running scams targeting customers of utility service providers. Reports of phone, email billing and door to door scams are back again and represent thousands of dollars lost by customer victims. That is why Minnesota utilities are participating in the first national Utilities United Against Scams (UUAS) event and have designated November 16th as “Utilities United Against Scams Day.” This day will be supported by a week-long campaign focused on exposing the tricks scammers use to steal money, and how customers can protect themselves.

“These schemes often ramp up with the change in seasons,” said Dana Badgerow, president and CEO of the BBB of Minnesota and North Dakota. “Like most scams, it plays on peoples’ fears and has proven to be quite effective, unfortunately.”

During the phone scam, a customer receives a phone call from an individual who falsely claims to be a utility representative. The scammer warns that the utility will disconnect

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the customer's electric or natural gas service if the customer fails to make a payment – usually within a short timeframe.

Scammers have even duplicated utilities' telephone messages and automated response systems so when customers call phone numbers provided by the scammer it sounds legitimate. Some of these scammers also use caller ID spoofing to replicate utilities' customer service numbers.

The campaign encourages the public to share these messages to help guard against scam activity. Some Minnesota utilities experience an increase of more than **30** percent in customer scam attempts when colder temperatures set in.

Red flags for scam activity

- The scammer tells the customer his or her account is past due and service will be disconnected if a large payment isn't made – usually within less than an hour.
- The scammer instructs the customer to purchase a pre-paid debit or credit card – widely available at retail stores – then instructs the customer to call back to supposedly make a payment to the utility.

How to protect yourself

- Utilities never ask or require a customer with a past due account to purchase a prepaid debit card to avoid disconnection.
- Customers with past due accounts receive an advance disconnection notification by mail– not a single notification one hour before disconnection.
- Know which utility providers serve you.
- If you suspect someone is trying to scam you, hang up and call your utility at the phone number listed on your bill and report it to the BBB. Never dial the phone number the scammers provide.
- Customers, who suspect or experience fraud, or feel threatened during contact with one of these scams, should contact local authorities.

The utility companies of Minnesota and the BBB continue to enhance efforts to educate the public. For the first time, in 2014, Minnesota utilities joined forces with the BBB to launch “Slam the Scam” - a coalition and awareness campaign aimed at warning customers and preventing scams. The coalition is encouraging customers who think they are being targeted by a scammer to simply end the conversation and “slam” down the phone.



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The [Better Business Bureau of Minnesota](#) is closely tracking these types of scams.

UUAS is a collaborative effort among the electric, gas, and water utility industries to help prevent utility service fraud through education, awareness, and customer advocacy initiatives. A primary goal of this collective effort is to help customers learn how to identify and avoid utility-related scams.

You can learn more about the UUAS effort at www.eei.org including further tips and resources to help spot and avoid utility scams.

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