



THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
MIDDLE DISTRICT *of* FLORIDA

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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Middle District of Florida

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Middle District Of Florida, Along With Three Other U.S. Attorney Offices In Districts Affected By Hurricane Irma, Establishes Task Force To Combat Disaster Fraud And Urge The Public To Be Vigilant In Reporting Suspected Fraud

Tampa, FL - The National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Florida, along with U.S. Attorney [Offices in the District of Puerto Rico](#), [Southern District of Florida](#), and [Northern District of Florida](#) announced the formation of task forces comprised of local, state and federal agencies in our respective areas to combat Hurricane Irma related illegal activity. The NCDF and U.S. Attorneys in these districts urge residents and businesses to immediately report suspected fraudulent activity relating to recovery and cleanup operations, fake charities claiming to be providing relief for victims, individuals submitting false claims for disaster relief and any other disaster fraud related activity.

The U.S. Department of Justice established the National Center for Disaster Fraud to investigate, prosecute, and deter fraud in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, when billions of dollars in federal disaster relief poured into the Gulf Coast region. Its mission has expanded to include suspected fraud from any natural or manmade disaster. More than 30 federal, state, and local agencies participate in the National Center for Disaster Fraud, which allows the center to act as a centralized clearinghouse of information related to disaster relief fraud.

While compassion, assistance, and solidarity are generally prevalent in the aftermath of natural disasters, unscrupulous individuals and organizations also use these tragic events to take advantage of those in need. In the wake of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, the NCDF has already received more than 400 complaints. Examples of illegal activity being reported to the NCDF and law enforcement include:

- Impersonation of federal law enforcement officials;

- Identity theft;
- Fraudulent submission of claims to insurance companies and the federal government;
- Fraudulent activity related to solicitations for donations and charitable giving;
- Fraudulent activity related to individuals and organizations promising high investment returns from profits from recovery and cleanup efforts;
- Price gouging;
- Theft, looting, and other violent crime

“Unfortunately, criminals can exploit disasters, such as Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, for their own gain by sending fraudulent communications through email or social media and by creating phony websites designed to solicit contributions,” said Acting Executive Director Corey R. Amundson of the National Center for Disaster Fraud. “Once the NCDF receives a complaint, it routes the complaints to the appropriate federal, state, or local law enforcement agency in the appropriate jurisdiction. In the process, we are able to de-conflict and identify trends, national schemes, and offenders operating in multi-jurisdictions. The Justice Department will aggressively pursue those who commit disaster fraud.”

“We will aggressively investigate and prosecute anyone who seeks to defraud or exploit the federal assistance programs established to help individuals, families, or businesses that have lost so much as a result of Hurricane Irma,” said Acting U.S. Attorney W. Stephen Muldrow for the Middle District of Florida. “Our Office will continue to protect the rights of our honest citizens affected by this disaster and ensure that they receive the necessary public and charitable assistance they deserve. If you suspect any fraud, we urge you to call the NCDF Hotline. Our efforts to combat fraud associated with Hurricane Irma will supplement the outstanding and ongoing efforts by the State of Florida and Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi.”

“Our efforts are directed at enforcing a zero tolerance policy,” said U.S. Attorney Rosa Emilia Rodríguez-Vélez for the District of Puerto Rico. “In the midst of the distress and losses caused by Hurricane Irma and the attending need for recovery and rebuilding, there can be no place for fraud and abuse.”

“As our South Florida community recovers from Hurricane Irma, the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of Florida and our law enforcement partners stand ready to investigate and prosecute in federal court anyone who seeks to re-victimize, defraud or exploit the individuals and businesses in need,” said Acting U.S. Attorney Benjamin G. Greenberg for the Southern District of Florida. “Our united enforcement front will work hard to combat criminal activity, including fraud schemes associated with the hurricane’s devastation. Our mission is to ensure that federal, state and local programs, as well as reputable public and charitable assistance initiatives reach those struck by the impact of our recent natural disaster and are not fraudulently diverted to the criminals’ pockets.”

“We do not tolerate fraud,” said U.S. Attorney Christopher P. Canova for the Northern District of Florida. “Individuals, families, and businesses have suffered, and will continue to suffer, tremendous losses. Emergency funds are needed to help them get back on their feet. Dozens of agencies, investigators, and prosecutors are ready to respond to credible allegations of fraud and abuse. If you are aware of fraud, we urge you to call the National Disaster Fraud Hotline.”

Members of the public who suspect fraud, waste, abuse, or allegations of mismanagement involving disaster relief operations, or believe they have been the victim of fraud from a person or organization soliciting relief funds on behalf of disaster victims, should contact the National Disaster Fraud Hotline toll free at (866) 720-5721. The telephone line is staffed by a live operator 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You can also fax information to the Center at (225) 334-4707, or email it to disaster@leo.gov.

Members of the public are reminded to apply a critical eye and do their due diligence before giving contributions to anyone soliciting donations on behalf of disaster victims. Solicitations can originate from e-mails, websites, door-to-door collections, mailings and telephone calls, and similar methods. Learn more about the NCDF at www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud. Tips for the public on how to avoid being victimized of fraud are at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/tips-avoiding-fraudulent-charitable-contribution-schemes>.

Topic(s):

Disaster Fraud

Financial Fraud

StopFraud

Component(s):

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