

The holiday season, the pandemic and “2020 fatigue” make our businesses and families vulnerable to scammers and opportunists. We can all avoid the following schemes with a little extra diligence:

1. **COVID Contact Tracing Scams**. Official tracers may contact you by text, telling you they will be calling later and identifying the phone number from which they will call. Scammers go a step further, including a link in the text. When you click on it, you could download software that gives them access to your phone and business or personal information. Never click a link in a text (or email) from an unknown source! You can find additional information at https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/attachments/coronavirus-advice-consumers/contact_tracing_scams_infographic-1-508.pdf
2. **Requests for Banking Information**. Beware of callers claiming to be a representative from the IRS or other government agency who ask for your bank account information. They will tell you they need it for the purpose of wiring you a stimulus payment. Report them immediately at <https://reportfraud.ftc.gov/#/>. The IRS will never ask for bank account information, social security numbers, or other sensitive information over the phone.
3. **Fraudulent Unemployment Claims**. In this scheme, identity thieves file false claims for unemployment benefits using a stolen social security number. If you receive a request to verify information in a claim for someone you currently employ, their identity has already been compromised. Work with your compromised employee to report the fraud to law enforcement and access the resources available at <https://www.identitytheft.gov/> Remind all of your employees to carefully safeguard their personal information.
4. **Offers Too Good to be True**. Offers for low cost investment advice, financial products, legal services and debt relief are a part of daily life, and not all are scams. Do your research before you commit, and certainly before you send money. Here are some questions to ask yourself:
 - Is this offer coming from a reputable company that I can research?
 - Are other service providers offering similar discounts, or is this an “outlier”?
 - Is this offer made by someone who is licensed? (this question is particularly important when it comes to financial advisors, attorneys, contractors and other regulated professions)
 - Even if this offer doesn’t appear to be a scam, am I being wooed with a low cost option because I am strapped for cash and vulnerable? Would this be my choice if I was not stretched thin by the events of 2020?

Let’s all turn up our fraud sensors this holiday season so that we can prepare for a stronger 2021 in Dakota County.