NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®

CONSUMER GUIDE: HOW TO PROTECT AGAINST REAL ESTATE WIRE FRAUD

Buying a home is an exciting milestone and major investment for you and your family. You can keep your investment safe by being mindful that real estate transactions are sometimes targeted by scammers attempting to perpetrate wire fraud. Annual losses from wire fraud amounted to $446.1 million in 2022, according to the most recent statistics available from the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3). The best way to reduce your risk is to work with professionals, including a REALTOR®, a member of the National Association of REALTORS®.

What is wire fraud?
Wire fraud is a scam using electronic communications to divert money to the bank accounts of cybercriminals.

How does real estate wire fraud work?
Cybercriminals target the participants in a real estate transaction, including buyers, sellers, real estate attorneys, title companies, and real estate brokers and agents. These scammers hack into email accounts, monitor the progress of the transaction, and wait for just the right moment when the transfer of funds is necessary for the closing. Then, they send the buyer an email with a change in payment type (from check to wire transfer) or a change from one bank account to the cybercriminal's account. These sophisticated fraudulent emails mimic the real person's identity using company logos and email addresses that are very close but off by a letter or number.

Why are scammers targeting real estate transactions?
A home sale is a large financial transaction that involves a mountain of paperwork—today usually handled electronically—and conducted by buyers who are sometimes unfamiliar with the process. Scammers prey on buyers' excitement and confusion.

How can you protect yourself against wire fraud?

- **Be informed.** At the beginning of the homebuying process, talk with your real estate agent about each step—including the transfer of funds for earnest money, down payment and closing. Make sure you know how you can verify any requests independently.
- **Verify wiring instructions.** If funds will be wired electronically, get instructions—in person, if possible—from the recipient. If you receive instructions through a different method, confirm them in person or through a phone call with the recipient using a trusted phone number.
- **Be suspicious of last-minute changes by email or voicemail.** Title companies and lenders have processes in place that shouldn't suddenly change. Examine any last-minute change or request for information carefully. Does the language make sense? Does it come from a verified email address?
- **Call a trusted source before and after you wire funds.** Pick up the phone and use a number you know (not one in the suspicious email or voicemail) to verify the legitimacy of any last-minute request. Don't wire any money without confirming the information with a trusted source. When you are responding to legitimate funding instructions, call to confirm receipt of funds immediately using a known number.
- **Act fast if you suspect fraud.** If, despite your best efforts, you suspect you've been a victim of wire fraud, contact your bank to try to stop the fund transfer and report it immediately to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3).

For more information, visit the Coalition to Stop Real Estate Wire Fraud.

Your real estate agent will help you navigate the sale of your home. An attorney can provide guidance on the laws in the state where you're purchasing. And remember: Only real estate professionals who are members of the National Association of REALTORS® may use the term REALTOR®, and they are obligated under NAR's Code of Ethics to work in your best interest. Please visit facts.realtor for more information and resources.

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CONSUMER GUIDE: SPOTTING DEEPFAKE SCAMS IN REAL ESTATE

Cyber-enabled fraud—use of the internet or other technology to steal money, data or identity—accounted for $13.7 billion in 2024, according to the latest data released by the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3). Among cybercrimes, the use of deepfake technology is a growing concern. Deepfake scams increased 40% year-over-year, according to the 2026 Identity Fraud Report by security firm Entrust. Here's what you need to know about deepfake scams to protect yourself during the sale or purchase of your home.

What are deepfakes? Entrust defines deepfakes as "realistic, AI-generated fake videos, images or audio recordings that mimic a real person's likeness."

How are deepfakes used in real estate? Scammers might use deepfake-generated audio or video to impersonate buyers, sellers, real estate agents, real estate lawyers, title agents or other professionals. By pretending to be real people involved in a real estate transaction, criminals can change the wiring or money transfer instructions to divert down payments or closing funds to their own bank accounts. They can also manipulate property photos or virtual tours to hide defects, exaggerate home features or even fabricate nonexistent properties to sell to unsuspecting buyers.

What can you do to protect yourself?

- Work with trusted professionals, like a real estate agent who's a REALTOR®, a member of the National Association of REALTORS®.
- Use a secure messaging system or encrypted emails (rather than a free email account) when communicating about a real estate transaction.
- Try to avoid entering into a transaction on a property you haven't seen in person or with a buyer or seller who communicates only electronically.
- Independently verify property documents and ownership through title companies and trusted parties. Never rely solely on digital copies that could have been altered.
- Ask for multifactor authentication before transferring funds or signing important documents. Many companies are now using a third-party verification tool, such as CertifID.
- Invest in fraud-detection tools that can detect deepfakes by analyzing facial movements in videos, voice anomalies and inconsistencies in digital images.
- Consider investing in an owner's title policy to safeguard against record fraud. The insurance protects you against forged deeds, fraudulent liens and fake owners.
- To verify instructions for wiring funds, always talk to the party who's receiving the funds by phone on a known number, or meet in person. Any urgent change in instructions—whether delivered through an email, audio message or a video call—is a red flag.

What should you do if you suspect a deepfake scam?

- Contact everyone involved in your transaction (real estate agent, lawyer, title company) to alert them to the suspected fraud so that they can exercise extra caution.
- Contact your local and state law enforcement.
- Report the incident to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3).

Related Resources

Consumer Guide: How to Protect Against Real Estate Wire Fraud
Consumer Guide: Understanding & Protecting Yourself From Title Fraud

Your real estate agent will help you navigate the purchase or sale of your home. An attorney can provide guidance on the laws in the state where you're purchasing. Please note that not all real estate professionals are REALTORS®. Only those who are members of the National Association of REALTORS® may use the term REALTOR®, and they are obligated under NAR's Code of Ethics to work in your best interest. Please visit facts.realtor for more information and resources.

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CONSUMER GUIDE: UNDERSTANDING & PROTECTING YOURSELF FROM TITLE FRAUD

Title fraud is a serious crime that can be overlooked and result in a property owner unknowingly losing the title of their property. Here's what you need to know about title fraud, how it happens, who's most at risk, and how you can prevent it from happening to you.

What is title fraud, and how is it different from other scams? Title fraud, or deed theft, is when someone illegally transfers the title or deed of your property without your knowledge, often using forged documents or fake IDs. The criminal's goal is to steal your money by making it seem like someone else owns your property or that you transferred your property to someone else. When left unaddressed, title fraud can result in foreclosure or eviction—even if you still live in the home.

How can someone steal my home's title? A scammer might forge your signature to transfer the property's title to themselves using a fake ID and file it with the local recorder's office. This makes it appear that you willingly transferred over the title of your home to them, and they now own it. Another scenario is where a scammer attempts to list and sell a property or take out a loan against it, claiming to be the owner. Fraudulent filings can be difficult to spot unless someone is actively monitoring public records.

What are some red flags that could indicate title fraud? Scammers often target properties that are unoccupied or do not have a mortgage, but there are specific behaviors that can signal something is wrong. Warning signs include a seller who is offering a vacant property for significantly less than its market value, communicates only through electronic means while avoiding phone or video conversations, or insists on using their own remote notary to close the sale. These tactics are designed to avoid detection and can be a sign that the transaction—or even the seller—is fraudulent. Agents who are REALTORS® can help you avoid instances of potential title fraud by working with trusted title and escrow companies, guiding you through secure transactions, and helping make sure your ownership is properly recorded and protected.

How can I protect myself from title fraud, especially when buying a home? If you currently own property, ask your local county if they offer fraud alerts for property documents, periodically check online tax and property records, and keep your ownership records in a secure place. When buying, make sure a full title search is done and consider purchasing owner's title insurance, a common step during the process of buying your first home. You should verify wiring instructions by phone to avoid related scams during the transaction process.

What does title insurance do? Title insurance protects you from title-related issues including fraudulent claims on a home. One of its key protections is legal defense and loss coverage in the event that someone else claims to own your property because of a forged deed. In fact, if you are financing your home with a mortgage, most lenders will require title insurance because it protects them from defects in the title and ensures that documents are valid and enforceable.

What are some warning signs that I might be a victim of title fraud? Warning signs include if you stop receiving property tax bills or receive mail for someone else at your address. Unexpected notices from banks or government offices may also be a sign that someone has tampered with your home's title.

What should I do if I think I'm a victim of title fraud? Alert the FBI via the Internet Crime Complaint Center, contact your local police, and speak to a real estate attorney as soon as possible. Report the fraud to your county recorder and notify your title insurance provider if you have coverage. Acting fast can help limit the damage. You may also want to place a fraud alert or credit freeze on your accounts to prevent further identity misuse.

Practices may vary based on state and local law. Consult your real estate professional and / or an attorney for details about state law where you are purchasing a home. Please visit facts.realtor for more information and resources.

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CONSUMER GUIDE: FAIR HOUSING

Buying or selling a home is more than a transaction—it's fundamental to your long-term goals and financial future. Consumers and agents all have rights and responsibilities to promote a home buying or selling process free from discrimination. Here's what you need to know:

What is "fair housing" and how does it help me? The federal Fair Housing Act prohibits discrimination in housing and housing-related transactions based on race, color, sex (including sexual orientation and gender identity), national origin, religion, disability, or familial status. Local and state fair housing laws may prohibit discrimination on additional protected classes. The bottom line is that discrimination hurts all sides of a home transaction, closes the door on the American dream of homeownership, and perpetuates economic inequality. Homebuyers, home sellers and real estate professionals depend on strong fair housing laws and practices for our communities and economy to thrive.

How do fair housing laws apply to me as a buyer? You should expect to receive the same professional service in the homebuying process regardless of any protected characteristic. This includes equitable treatment by your agent, the seller, the seller's agent, appraisers, lenders, and others involved in your home search and purchase. You should also expect your agent to provide you with home options in your price range regardless of the racial or ethnic composition of neighborhoods.

How do fair housing laws apply to me as a seller? You cannot discriminate when selling your home based on the buyer's race, color, sex (including sexual orientation and gender identity), national origin, religion, disability, or familial status. You also cannot instruct your agent to conduct a sale any differently based on these prohibited reasons. That means you cannot advertise your home to just one or to a limited number of groups.

How does working with an agent who is a REALTOR® help ensure fair housing practices are followed? In addition to an obligation to comply with applicable fair housing laws, REALTORS® adhere to the highest ethical standards. the REALTOR® Code of Ethics obligates REALTORS® to provide equal professional services to all consumers. Among other ethical duties, REALTORS® must not discuss the demographic composition of a neighborhood, advertise a property in a way that indicates any preference, limitations, or discrimination for a prohibited reason. Read more about REALTORS®' duty to put client interests above their own here.

Where can I report suspected discrimination in the homebuying or selling process? Report housing discrimination to the Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity (FHEO) at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and ethical violations to your agent's state or local REALTOR® Association (find an association here). You can also report concerns to a local nonprofit fair housing organization (find by ZIP code here). Fair housing laws prohibit harassment or intimidation if you report discriminatory behavior.

The Fair Housing Act is a federal law; many state and local laws provide additional protections. Consult your real estate professional, an attorney, and your state's housing authority for details about applicable fair housing laws where you are selling or purchasing a home. Please visit facts.realtor for more information and resources.