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Some seeking affordable rentals find scam

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By MELISSA TANJI - Staff Writer (mtanji@mauinews.com) , The Maui News

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The Realtors Association of Maui and a Maui Realtor are warning the public about Internet scams that attempt to steal money from people looking for affordable rental properties.

While Internet rental scams are nothing new and have gone on for years, Realtor Kim Delmore said that her family's agency has been "affected more in the last two to three weeks or so" by fake rental ads using her agency's photos and information about homes for sale.

She and her family agency, Delmore Realty in Wailuku, have received a flurry of calls and emails from people seeking rentals who have seen "their" listings on Craigslist or other Internet sites. The contacts have come after the people seeking the rentals do more research on the property and sometimes have driven by the advertised home to learn that it's not for rent but for sale.

RAM President Terry Tolman confirmed that these types of scams have been going on for at least seven or eight years. In the past few weeks, Delmore has taken the brunt of it.

"It's all over the country. The scammers can be from all over the world," Tolman added.

He said that he doesn't know of anyone on Maui who has fallen victim to this scam, but he's sure that it has happened. The scam applies to vacation rentals as well.

Tolman advised renters that if they live on Maui, they should drive by the rental site before emailing an address or calling the possible landlord. If there is a "for sale" sign in the yard, "it's a dead giveaway" that they have come across a scam, he said.

And if the rental deal looks like a real bargain, renters also should exercise caution.

"If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is," he added.

Tolman said that if the owner of the rental lives off-island, the property owner is supposed to have an on-island representative.

Usually with the scam ads, people are asked to provide personal information and to wire money via Western Union. Unfortunately, those who fall victim to scammers tend to be less well off, which means they are looking for the best deals - which may be fake deals, he said.

Those who are taken by the scams should file a police report and report the incident to the Internet Crime Complaint Center, a partnership between the FBI and the National White Collar Crime Center, at www.ic3.gov.

RAM also encourages people to advise Craigslist of the scam and to make their own entry on the ad to notify others of the scam; other potential victims still may be clicking on the fake ad.

In Delmore's case, scammers have been taking the agency's

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photos and property information for homes for sale off Internet sites and using them to post fake rental ads. Then, the scammers post email addresses and phone numbers for people to contact. After some exchanges, the scammers ask for money in exchange for the keys to the home, she said.

Scammers may ask for half of the rent to obtain the keys to the house, Delmore said. Normally, landlords will ask for one month's rent upfront and not accept a partial payment.

Delmore cautioned that anyone can make up an email address and get a phone number. Scammers used Delmore's father, Tom, and his name in a fake email address (Tom is also a Realtor).

Kim Delmore said that, so far, she has not heard of anyone who has lost money in the scam involving her company.

"They almost got scammed," she said of one prospective renter. "But their better senses told them something was wrong."

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