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Utilities Unite Against Scammers

By Michael W. Kahn, Staff Writer

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With scammers taking Americans for untold billions of dollars every year, the nation's utilities are banding together to raise awareness and fight back.



This is one of the warnings to consumers that can be used by utilities in Utilities United Against Scams. (Photo By: UUAS)

"People will try anything to take your money," said Jimmy Autry, senior vice president of member and community relations at Flint Energies, one of more than 40 co-ops, investor-owned and municipals taking part in Utilities United Against Scams (UUAS). Trade associations including NRECA and the Edison Electric Institute are also signed on to the effort.

It has its roots in a huge conference of utility representatives last spring, where the subject of scams came up. Jared Lawrence, vice president, revenue services at Duke Energy Customer Services, is a founder of UUAS. He said Duke started tracking attempts to scam its customers in 2015.

"What we saw was that scammers would ramp up their activity in one of our regions," Lawrence said. When Duke would blitz conventional and social media with warnings, "the activity would die down, only to flare up again after a few months.

"It became apparent that the scammers were targeting one utility's territory for a period, then moving on to another utility's territory once the first utility sounded the alarm."

Lawrence said it was clear there had to be "coordinated communications and other prevention strategies across utilities." And according to law enforcement, that would help build criminal cases. So over the next year, utilities will start sharing all of the methods the scammers use.

UUAS is gathering signatures on a letter to U.S. Rep. Brad Wenstrup, R-Ohio, who will introduce a resolution to declare the third Wednesday in November "Utilities United Against Scams Day." November 16 will be the debut, and UUAS has developed tools for participating utilities, including social media posts, op-eds and website banners.

Reynolds, Georgia-based [Flint Energies \(https://www.flintenergies.com/\)](https://www.flintenergies.com/) has seen too many of its members victimized. In one case a few weeks ago, a business member was heading to a supermarket to buy the prepaid money cards the scammers often demand, when they drove by the Flint Energies office and stopped in, figuring that would be faster.

"They walked in the office with \$1,600 in cash. And we said, 'No, that's a scam. Whatever you do, don't pay it,'" Autry said. But other members haven't been so lucky—with two losing a combined \$3,600 in recent weeks.

Lawrence said that between June 2015 and October 2016, Duke received 7,167 reports of scam attempts from its customers. Nearly 600 reported losing money totaling \$602,000.

"We know that only a fraction of our customers call us to report a scam, and some likely do not even know they have been scammed, so these stats are a fraction of the likely total activity/losses," Lawrence said.

Autry has even called 800 numbers the scammers give and heard his co-op's phone message on them. He said businesses are often targeted because scammers can get more money.

"They call a restaurant at lunchtime when they're really busy and say, 'I'm Jimmy from Flint Energies and your bill is overdue. If you don't pay me in 45 minutes we're going to be forced to cut off your power.'"

Cooperatives can participate in the campaign by educating their members using the [customizable materials available on cooperative.com \(zip\) \(/interest-areas/communications/straight-talk/Open%20Documents/2016_12_utilities-united-against-scams.zip\)](#) (login required).

Michael W. Kahn is a staff writer for NRECA.

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