

The uncertain times we are currently experiencing have created opportunities for people to showcase the best part of ourselves by helping those in need and answering calls to action to help in the fight against the COVID-19 virus. Unfortunately, these times have also created an opportunity for criminals who lurk about waiting to exploit events like this for their personal gain. In these extraordinary times, criminals hide in the fear and uncertainty present in the landscape and attempt to use this fear and uncertainty to take from victims. Criminals are already formulating and deploying plans based on the COVID-19 situation to steal money or personal information from people. It is critically important that people in these times turn to trusted and official sources of information, especially when making decisions about their safety and the security of their personal information.

When seeking information on the status of the COVID-19 virus, people should consult health organizations such as the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control, the Minnesota Department of Health, Benton County Public Health, or their own health care provider. All of these organizations are working diligently to track the virus, share the latest ways to contain the virus, and tell people of any developments on treatments or vaccines. If you seek advice from outside these sources, you will find claims that range from the simply incorrect to the patently false and ridiculous. Stick to official sources of advice to ensure that you are taking the right measures to protect your personal safety.

When navigating the on-line world, know that there are many criminals prowling about hoping that they can use COVID-19 to lower your inhibitions and entice you into accessing questionable websites or clicking on unknown links. Resist the temptation to lower your skepticism of these dangerous places on the internet. Never click on links sent to you by people you don't know or weren't expecting to hear from, even if it pertains to COVID-19. Avoid unfamiliar websites that are not from trusted sources or you may find yourself fighting a computer virus to go along with the current pandemic virus.

Avoid modern day snake oil remedies. There already are and will continue to be a number of people who will offer products they claim will test for, treat, or cure the COVID-19 virus. Any of these products which do not have government approval are either useless scams or perhaps even dangerous for those who choose to use them. Again, stick to trusted health organizations for advice on how to keep yourself healthy or recover from an illness.

Beware of those looking to steal your money or personal information using the guise of stimulus payments. There will undoubtedly be those who will attempt to steal stimulus payments from victims or use the premise of stimulus payments to trick victims into providing them with personal information, like bank accounts or social security numbers. The government will not be contacting you via telephone or email for your stimulus payment. If you have questions about whether the IRS has the information needed to get you your portion of the stimulus bill, check the IRS website at www.irs.gov. Check your mailboxes often and report any suspicious vehicles or people seen around mail receptacles.

Finally, rest assured that law enforcement is here and will remain in place to keep Benton County safe, even in these uncertain times. These are the times for us to come together and support

each other's needs, rather than turn on our fellow citizens. Stay home, practice social distancing, and be kind. Together, we will get through this.

As a whole, we've become pretty skilled at seeing through phishing attempts and scams. There is no reason to panic and also no reason to let fear lead you into becoming a victim. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.