

Oregon attorney general: Watch out for coronavirus scams

By Dick Hughes

For the Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Scammers, fraudsters and price gougers are preying on Oregonians, capitalizing on their concerns about coronavirus.

“There are no known cures or vaccines — yet — for COVID-19. So anyone trying to sell you one is lying,” Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum said. “And as for any money that you may eventually get from the federal government, and we hope you will, please be careful because scammers are already scheming on how to intercept all or some of that money.”

Rosenblum and Gov. Kate Brown spoke during a conference call this week with Oregon members of AARP, which had received more than 500 calls on its price-gouging hotline.

“Exploiting the public’s fear for profit will not be tolerated,” Rosenblum said.

Brown this week extended her executive order declaring an abnormal market disruption due

CONTACT THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

- To sign up for scam alerts: OregonConsumer.gov
- To report coronavirus consumer scams and price gouging: 503-378-8442
- To report bias incidents, including ones related to the pandemic, and hate crimes: 1-844-924-BIAS

to COVID-19. The order authorizes legal action against wholesalers and merchants who provide “essential consumer goods or services for an amount that represents an unconscionably excessive price,” such as at least 15% above the normal price.

Rosenblum said the only other time she could recall the regulation being invoked was during Salem’s water crisis two years ago, when some sellers jacked up prices for bottled water.

Responding to the current price gouging, the Oregon Department of Justice has sent more than 20 cease-and-desist

TIPS FOR CONSUMERS

- Federal and state agencies offer these tips:
- Don’t respond to texts, emails or calls about checks from the government.
- Hang up on robocalls. Never give out Social Security, Medicare, bank or credit card numbers or other personal information to such callers.
- Ignore online, door-to-door and other offers for COVID-19 vaccinations, cures and home test kits. None exist.
- Be cautious of emails claiming to be from the Oregon Health Authority, CDC or World Health Organization. To get the latest information, go to such websites as healthoregon.org/coronavirus, coronavirus.gov and usa.gov/coronavirus. And don’t click on links from sources you don’t know.
- Don’t give in to pressure from supposed coronavirus charities. Don’t donate in cash, by gift card or by wiring money.
- Watch out for online job postings and emails promising you easy money for little to no effort. Disregard emails, private messages and phone calls from individuals whom you don’t know but who claim to be overseas and in need of your financial support. These scams aim to steal your money or use your financial accounts to launder their illicit funds.
- Don’t fall for scammers who pose as workplace inspectors or other government employees and demand immediate payment of supposed “fines.” Real government employees carry credentials and never ask for on-the-spot payments.
- Sources: Federal Trade Commission, FBI, Oregon Department of Revenue, Oregon Department of Justice, Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services and other agencies.

letters to businesses, ordering them to reduce their prices on toilet paper, hand sanitizer, face masks or other essentials. Rosenblum said most businesses complied after learning price gouging was illegal.

Other current scams involve the stimulus payments headed to Americans as part of the federal government’s coronavirus response. Distribution through direct deposit or mailed checks could begin next week.

The official term is “economic impact payment,” but state and federal tax officials warn scammers will emphasize such words as “stimulus check” or “stimulus payment.”

Rosenblum noted Oregonians do not need to pay anything upfront or give personal information to receive the payments, despite what scammers might claim.

“The government’s not going to contact you to ask you for your Social Security number or your bank account or your credit card number to confirm your identity. So people who ask for this type of information are scammers,” she said.

Most government communications with Oregonians are through mail, although even some of those could be fake demands for money. Rosenblum urged people to take control by looking up the phone numbers or websites of government agencies and contacting them directly when in doubt or suspicious of a scam.

Oregon rural hospitals losing huge revenues, laying off workers

By Andrew Selsky

The Associated Press

SALEM — Rural community hospitals in Oregon have seen huge drops in revenue with elective procedures banned due to the coronavirus outbreak and are having to lay off workers to survive, even as many beds sit empty.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown on March 17 ordered that all elective and non-urgent medical procedures be canceled or rescheduled until June 15 or beyond in order to preserve masks and other protective equipment for the state’s COVID-19 response.

Added to that, there are fewer visits to emergency rooms, with some people doing virtual visits with a medical professional, fearing an ER visit could expose them to coronavirus.

Becky Hultberg, CEO of Oregon Association Of Hospitals And Health Systems, says consequently, hospitals have experi-

enced an unprecedented decline in revenues of 40% to 60% in one month.

“Staffing is one of the hospital’s most significant costs. So as revenue declines, some hospitals have been forced to furlough or lay off staff,” Hultberg said in a telephone interview.

She did not have statewide numbers on jobs lost, either permanently or temporarily.

But claims for unemployment insurance reflect the scope of the problem. In only one week in late March, the state employment department received 7,600 initial claims for unemployment insurance from workers in health care and social assistance fields, up from 396 two weeks before. Of all job sectors, only workers in accommodation-food services filed more claims.

Local news reports show that, from the wide open spaces of Eastern Oregon to the rugged coast, rural hospitals are feeling

the pinch and are taking drastic measures.

In Oregon’s remote southwest corner along the Pacific Ocean, the Curry Health Network has laid off, furloughed or cut back the hours of 192 employees. That’s more than half of the staff who work in the network’s hospital in Gold Beach and several medical clinics. The management team also took a 20% reduction in pay.

“We are not alone in this,” Curry Health Network Chief Executive Officer Ginny Williams told the board of directors. “It’s impacting all hospitals in rural places.”

Sara Dickerson, a family nurse practitioner, was laid off from the Curry Health Network as of April 7.

“What is most upsetting to me was the treatment of my medical assistant, who was terminated on March 31,” Dickerson told the Curry Coastal Pilot newspaper. She said the assistant now has no

medical insurance this month.

The Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems on Tuesday asked Brown, a Democrat, for \$200 million in new state funding to be allocated directly to hospitals “to address initial urgent needs of hospitals so they can continue providing services.”

The state is expected to have a lot less money to spend because the newly unemployed are no longer paying income taxes. Hultberg said her group recognizes that significant budget challenges lie ahead, but added: “People count on hospitals in a crisis.”

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, a Republican representing a wide swath of Eastern and Central Oregon, has urged that rural hospitals be prioritized for money coming from a funding increase that Congress recently passed.

“Our rural community hospitals are struggling financially right now in large part because

the governor shut down any elective procedures,” Walden said.

Oregon is not expected to see a big spike in COVID-19 cases as long as people keep staying home and maintaining social distancing when out on urgent errands, state health office Dean Sidelinger says.

“We know it comes at a huge sacrifice,” Sidelinger said. “People have lost their jobs. Our small and large businesses are suffering.”

At the peak of the outbreak, expected around April 22 in Oregon according to a projection by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, there will be more than enough hospital beds and ICU beds available.

But the hospitals association is not advocating that restrictions on elective procedures be relaxed.

“I would rather be having the conversation today about hospital sustainability than the conversation about mortuary capacity,” Hultberg said. “It is too early to talk about changing course.”



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