

# Fake online ads intend to dupe would-be Section 8 applicants

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Section 8 is hard enough to come by, but those who are duped by fake websites that appeared Feb. 4 on Google, Bing and Yahoo may have no chance at all.

The Seattle Housing Authority opened registration for the Section 8 lottery Feb. 4. The same day, a number of fake websites promising to guide people through the application process have appeared on web searches for the agency.

Section 8 allows people making less than 30 percent of the area's median income to use a federal subsidy to rent in any neighborhood.

Google searches for "Seattle Housing Authority" and "Portland Housing Authority" brought up three or four of these links above or to the side of the regular search results. In small, gray print they are identified as ads.

When Portland's housing authority, Home Forward, opened its Section 8 waiting list in November, it received phone calls from people reporting that tried to apply for the waiting list on a site named [www.gosection8.com](http://www.gosection8.com), only to be asked for a credit card number. That's not how Section 8 works, says Home Forward spokesperson Shelly Marchesi.

"We assured them that we were federally prohibited from charging anyone to apply for Section 8 and told them to apply via our website, [www.homeforward.org](http://www.homeforward.org)."

The ads disappeared from Google searches Feb. 11, but remain on Bing and Yahoo.

A few of the bogus sites, including [housingvoucher.org](http://housingvoucher.org), look deceptively user-friendly and professional. It takes about five minutes for applicants to hand over email addresses, home addresses, phone numbers and personal information. After clicking through a few side offers for grants, Social Security benefits, credit checks and personal loans, the website says "Congratulations" and directs applicants to check their email accounts for more information.

The problem is, they haven't actually applied at all.

Although [housingvoucher.org](http://housingvoucher.org) does not actually offer housing, the process flashes a few application tips and warnings for



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HOME FORWARD

applicants to act quickly because housing in "safe neighborhoods" disappears quickly.

"We would tell people that if there are any charges involved, or if the site asks for credit card information, they are in the wrong place and could be scammed," Marchesi says. "We also would urge people to go to their local housing authority. Housing authorities administer the Section 8 waiting list process. Even in the rare cases in which housing authorities have partnered

with other organizations for this support, the housing authority will know what the application process is in their community."

People who are tricked by the fake ads could be vulnerable to spam, computer viruses and unwelcome mailers. Worse than that, said SHA spokesperson Michelle Ackermann, they might miss out on subsidized housing entirely.

"They're not even in the running for a chance to get a voucher," she said.

SHA has filed complaints with Google and other search engines and asked that the fake websites be taken down.

They also turned to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) for help.

SHA is encouraging people to file complaints with the IC3 at [ic3.gov](http://ic3.gov). If enough people complain, Ackermann said, the agency could take action.

Section 8 applicants aren't the only ones to get duped by Internet ads. There are a

number of fake websites that claim to be web portals for the federal Bureau of Housing and Urban Development and the Federal Housing Administration.

Leland Jones, public affairs officer for HUD's regional office in Seattle, said the agency and its would-be clients are often the targets of such scams.

Tricksters have also tried to dupe food stamp recipients. In Florida in 2011, fake sites appeared online offering help with food stamps, and like those targeting SHA clients, collected personal information but offered no help.

In Seattle, so far 15,000 people have filled out applications for the lottery to get on a waiting list of 2,000. There's no way of knowing how many have been led astray by the ads. Registration closed on Feb. 22.

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