



Charlotte Regional Realtor® Association

Fraudulent Internet real estate listings increasing

Members and consumers have been dealing with fraudulent listings being posted on websites that allow anyone to post information on them. The most frequently reported are Craigslist and HotPads.com (to their credit, each site has been very responsive to remove fraudulent listings once they have been notified).

The scam usually goes something like this: Information about a property that is actually actively listed for sale is posted on one of the sites as a lease at a significantly reduced monthly payment. (We are talking about a house that might have a monthly mortgage payment of \$4,000 being posted as for lease at \$1,300 — what a great deal!). The interested consumer will contact the “owner” via the site about the property. The “owner” will respond that they are out of the country on missionary work (most frequently in Africa but sometimes Asia or even just in a different city outside of the state). They tell the interested, prospective renter to drive by the house to see if they like it from the outside and that they will have to overnight the keys to them if they decide they want to lease the property. BUT the rental applicant will need to wire the first month’s rent and the deposit first. Who would do that? Apparently, a lot of people.

Recently, associations across the country have fielded calls from various media outlets about this scam.

One of the tips that is often recommended to prospective renters is to look at the appraisal rolls to see who the owner is. Seems smart, right? The scammers are even smarter. In most situations, the scammer has also checked to see who the owner is and has registered an email address with that name (i.e., if the homeowner is John Doe, they will use johndoe@gmail.com) so you think you are dealing with the actual homeowner since the names match. It doesn’t take more than a few minutes to create a new, fictitious email address to help pull off the scheme.

The main things to remember are that if it sounds too good to be true, then it likely is. Also, don’t lease a property from someone who you have never met in person. What has tripped up many of these situations has been when the interested renter just knocked on the door of the house. They have found out very quickly that the listing was not legitimate.

As a Realtor®, you should be aware that this is happening and set up a Google Alert to email you whenever the address of your property is found on the Internet. If you find your listing posted on Zillow, Trulia or some other public website as a fake rental, you must report the issue to the website operator, not CMLS.

- On Zillow, report fake listings by clicking on the “Report a problem with this listing” link.
- On Trulia, click on the “Report Error” button.
- If your listing is on Craigslist, alert Craigslist by flagging the post as “Prohibited” (upper, right-hand corner).
- On HotPads.com, report fake listings by clicking on the “Report Listing” icon.

People assume that the criminals are obtaining the images and information for the listings from the association or MLS, but it is also possible for them to have been obtained from any of the other sites where the listings appear.

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