

# Scene

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January 1-5, 2018



## Scammers target MidAmerican Energy customers with fake disconnect threats



Travis K. Fischer  
Mid-America  
Publishing

Nobody likes to get a call from the bill collector, but it's even worse when the bill collector is a fake.

Since December 22, Iowans have been bombarded with a wave of calls from scammers posing as MidAmerican Energy representatives. The calls begin with the scammer claiming that the target has an outstanding utility bill that must be immediately paid, lest their electricity get turned off.

"With electricity being a very necessary utility, it's easier for them to con people into believing it's a legitimate call and something that warrants their immediate attention and action," says Adam Jacobi, a Public Relations Representative with MidAmerican Energy.

As technology becomes more sophisticated, scammers have been able to better present themselves as legitimate, using phone systems that can even trick caller ID into displaying MidAmerican Energy as the caller.

Concerned that their customers are being taken advantage of, MidAmerican Energy has launched an informational "Slam the Scam" campaign to educate customers about the tricks and tactics scammers may try to use against them.

Scam calls are an everyday occurrence, and while the details may change, the general methods stay the same. These calls depend on surprising the target with a sudden demand for payment in order to avoid a devastating situation. As the holidays roll in and the weather gets colder, threatening people with the loss of electricity can be an effective bluff. Other times, the scam may involve fake arrest warrants or even claims of unpaid fines for missing jury duty.

"The scheme itself is actually a pretty consistent scheme," said



Ben Bellus, an Assistant Attorney General with the state's consumer protection division.

The Iowa Attorney General's office has been dealing with the recent wave of scam calls as well, setting up a hotline for people to gain information about the current scam going around.

Bellus says that their office has been receiving on average five calls a day from people reporting the attempted scam, which is thought to be merely the tip of the iceberg for the actual number of people receiving these calls.

"In an age where you have automatic dialers, these guys can be remarkably efficient, unfortunately," said Bellus. "I know we've gotten enough calls here that we're confident that it's pretty wide spread across Iowa."

Unfortunately, preventing these type of scam calls or prosecuting those responsible is often an effort in futility.

"They're hard cases to investigate because these guys use technology to spoof the number," said Bellus. "As far as finding out who is doing it, it's almost impossible."

Even if the calls could be traced back to their source, Bellus says operations like this are probably

automated from outside of the United States, adding an additional layer of complications to tracking and bringing them to justice.

Instead, the best defense against scam calls is an informed populous.

While scammers may be able to spoof a phone number, there are other signs that give them away. The most obvious being the call itself. If you receive a call about having your power disconnected, and it is coming as a surprise, then chances are good it isn't a legitimate call.

"Disconnection is never the first step," says Jacobi. "It's always the last resort, and there are always multiple communications before that."

Low income Iowans should also be aware of Iowa's winter moratorium. The Iowa Utilities Board offers a Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program that helps qualifying households with their energy payments and protects them from having their utilities shut off between November 1 and April 1.

Another telltale sign is that scammers will often ask their targets to pay with a pre-paid debit card, even going so far to demand

that their targets drop what they are doing to go to the nearest store to purchase one. If such a demand is made, it should be an immediate warning sign that the call is not legitimate.

"No utility company or other service company is ever going to demand one specific type of payment," says Jacobi. "That's a form of payment that MidAmerican Energy doesn't even accept."

In rare occasions, scammers may even attempt to collect money in person, impersonating an energy auditor or repairman and demanding an immediate payment in order to avoid the disconnection of service.

"That's another thing that should immediately trip suspicions," says Jacobi. "There's nobody that would ever come and demand a payment."

If you receive a scam call or are confronted by a person claiming to be a utility employee and suspect they are a scammer, the best thing to do is hang up or shut the door and call the local police to report it. Do not call back the number given by the scammer and never give out personal information in an unsolicited phone call.

If you are still concerned about owing an outstanding amount on your utility bill, you can always check your bill online or call the company yourself to confirm your balance.

"If people get a phone call that doesn't seem legitimate, they can always hang up and call the number on their utility bill," says Jacobi. "That way they are the ones that are initiating the conversation."

## STATEWIDE CLASSIFIEDS

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## Tips to help realize your goals in the year ahead

At the dawn of a new year, many people set goals to motivate themselves to change. But as January 1 drifts further into the rearview mirror, it can be easy to settle into old habits and forget about the resolutions and goals established at the turn of the calendar.

Staying on course and achieving one's goals requires discipline. In addition to working hard, men and women who want to realize their goals in the year ahead can take several steps to increase their chances of being successful.

- Examine your priorities. Achieving the goals is easier when their goals can be among your biggest priorities. Examine your priorities to determine if you can fully commit to goals that may require significant time commitments. Men and women who are already stretched thin may need to recalibrate their goals or make changes in other areas of their lives before they can fully commit to pursuing new goals.

- Be specific in regard to planning. Being specific when choos-



ing goals is important, but it's equally important to be as specific as possible in regard to developing a plan to realize those goals. Before embarking on a journey to realize your goals, figure out how you're going to achieve them. Create a new daily or weekly schedule that allots time to realize your goals, seeking input from loved ones whose lives may be affected by your new schedule.

- Make note of potential obstacles. Recognizing potential hurdles in advance of their appearance can help you overcome these obstacles and stay the course toward achieving your goals. For example, men and women hoping

to lose weight can look ahead to occasions that might compromise their efforts, such as a loved one's wedding or backyard barbecue. Recognizing these obstacles in advance gives people a chance to develop a plan to overcome them. In the weight loss example, men and women can choose vegetarian options from reception menus or resolve to avoid alcohol, which tends to be high in calories.

- Start small, but start immediately. Lifestyle changes can be difficult, so make small changes initially and gradually work toward larger, more significant changes. Starting small can lay a successful foundation, but it's also important to start immediately. Procrastination can reduce the likelihood of achieving your goals, and the earlier you get started the more quickly you and your loved ones will adjust to the changes necessary to realize your goals.

The dawn of a new year is a great time to set new goals. Bringing those goals to fruition requires careful planning and commitment.

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— Shiloh Fernandez, Actor

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## How You Can Avoid 7 Costly Mistakes if Hurt at Work

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