

Disaster prompts criminals to devise new scams

Computer-related fraud topping list

The Department of Technology and Information (DTI), in conjunction with Delaware's Attorney General's Office, has issued a warning to all Delawareans regarding computer scams, spam and fraud related to the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

"It is tragic and appalling that unscrupulous people are using the worst national disaster the United States has experienced in recent memory, for purposes of criminal fraud," said Delaware's CIO, Thomas Jarrett. "We want to warn Delawareans not to fall prey to fraudulent websites masquerading as charitable organizations or phony emails pretending to solicit money for well-known reputable charities."

In less than two days after the hurricane, internet fraudsters were already beginning to flood the Internet with websites promising to forward money to relief agencies and workers. Websites have emerged with names such as Katrinahelp.com and KatrinaRelief.com contain vague messages regarding their search for relief agencies to use their website and urging others to share



JARRETT



BRADY

their good fortune with Katrina's victims through the site.

"These tragedies bring out the best in many of us, but also bring out scam artists who take advantage of our generosity for others in need," said Attorney General M. Jane Brady. "It is reprehensible."

Brady is advising Delawareans to beware of Katrina disaster solicitations that may not be from legitimate charities. Con artists may use sound-alike names, resembling well-known charities, or look-alike websites or emails masquerading as legitimate charities. If citizens have concerns about a solicitation, she urged them to call the Consumer Protection Unit in her office.

It is not just solicitations about which consumers should be concerned. Computer security experts also caution computer users to be wary of emails claiming to contain attached photos of the Ka-

trina disaster areas. Clicking on these attached files could launch computer viruses or worms.

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Unit recommends that citizens never give out personal financial information in response to a telephone solicitation or email. They should contact the charity themselves or physically type in a charity's website instead of clicking on a link. People should also avoid cash donations and make checks payable to the organization, not an individual. Lastly, if donating by credit card, people should never type a credit card or bank account number into an email.

DTI suggests that citizens carefully research any hurricane relief donation sites in order to avoid these internet scams. One source for independent verification of charities is GuideStar.org

(http://GuideStar.org). GuideStar includes listings of those charitable groups that have registered with and met the guidelines of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service's terms for a nonprofit charity. An-

other site sponsored by the Better Business Bureau, www.give.org monitors charities. DTI further advises Delawareans never to reply to any unsolicited or unfamiliar email address.

IRS tips

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people who either want to make contributions or form a specific charity.

"We encourage citizens to make sure their contributions are put to the best use possible to help Hurricane Katrina victims," said IRS Commissioner Mark W. Everson. "The IRS will do everything possible to assist both taxpayers and charities in this difficult time."

The IRS also issued these following reminders to citizens and charities:

- Publication 78 lists charities with tax-exempt status, and a searchable on-line version is available through IRS.gov
- Publication 526, "Charitable Contributions," provides information on making contributions to charities
- Taxpayers may claim a deduction for contributions to charitable organizations only if they itemize deductions on Schedule A of their Form 1040. They should retain proof of the contribution and, if the amount is more than \$250, must obtain an acknowledgement from the charity for the amount to be deductible.

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