

The Virgin Islands Consortium

U.S. Attorney's Office And V.I. Attorney General's Office Establish Task Force To Combat Disaster Fraud And Urge Public To Report Suspected Fraud

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The U.S. Attorney's Office announces the formation of a task force comprised of local and federal agencies to combat illegal activity related to Hurricanes Irma and Maria, the U.S. Attorney's Office announced today. Acting U.S. Attorney Joycelyn Hewlett urges residents and businesses to immediately report suspected fraudulent activity related to recovery and clean-up operations, fake charities claiming to be providing relief for victims, individuals submitting false claims for disaster relief, and any other disaster fraud-related activity.

While compassion, assistance, and solidarity are generally prevalent in the aftermath of natural disasters, unscrupulous individuals and organizations also use these tragic events to take advantage of those in need. In the wake of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, the U.S. Department of Justice National Center for Disaster Fraud NCDF has already received more than 400 complaints. Examples of illegal activity being reported to the NCDF and law enforcement include:

- Impersonation of federal law enforcement officials;
- Identity theft;
- Fraudulent submission of claims to insurance companies and the federal government;
- Fraudulent activity related to solicitations for donations and charitable giving;
- Fraudulent activity related to individuals and organizations promising high investment returns from profits from recovery and cleanup efforts;
- Price gouging;
- Theft, looting, and other violent crime.

Members of the public who suspect fraud, waste, abuse, or allegations of mismanagement involving disaster relief operations, or believe they have been the victim of fraud from a person or organization soliciting relief funds on behalf of disaster victims, should contact the National Disaster Fraud Hotline toll free at (866) 720-5721. The telephone line is staffed by a live operator 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You can also fax information to the Center at (225) 334-4707, or email it to disaster@leo.gov. The U.S. Attorney's Office is unable to receive incoming calls at its usual telephone numbers at this time. Please use the following temporary number to call the St. Thomas or St. Croix office: (703) 285-0852.

"Unfortunately, criminals exploit disasters such as hurricanes for their own gain," Hewlett said. "We will aggressively investigate and prosecute anyone who commits disaster fraud, so if you are aware of fraud, please call the National Disaster Fraud Hotline."

"Whether it is price gouging on life sustaining commodities, fraudulent activity involving government vendors, home contractors, or insurance fraud, the Attorney General's Office stands ready to work with the U.S. Attorney's Office and the other task force members to combat disaster fraud in the Territory," said Virgin Islands Attorney General Claude Earl Walker.

The U.S. Department of Justice established the National Center for Disaster Fraud to investigate, prosecute, and deter fraud in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, when billions of dollars in federal disaster relief poured into the Gulf Coast region. Its mission has expanded to include suspected fraud from any natural or manmade disaster. More than 30 federal, state, and local agencies participate in the National Center for Disaster Fraud, which allows the center to act as a centralized clearinghouse of information related to disaster relief fraud.

Members of the public are reminded to apply a critical eye and do their due diligence before giving contributions to anyone soliciting donations on behalf of disaster victims. Solicitations can originate from e-mails, websites, door-to-door collections, mailings and telephone calls, and similar methods. Learn more about the NCDF at www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud. Tips for the public on how to avoid being victimized of fraud are at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/tipsavoiding-fraudulent-charitable-contribution-schemes>.

