

How scammers are using COVID-19 vaccine to steal money, info

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Scammers are using people's desperation for COVID-19 vaccines in the midst of a pandemic as a bargaining chip to steal money and personal information.

Though it doesn't appear to be a widespread problem in Michigan, the state Attorney General's Office told the *Free Press* Thursday that it has gotten one report of a fraudster offering a coronavirus vaccine in exchange for money.

"I hope that can be seen as a good sign that people are contacting the proper sources for the vaccine and being cautious about who they provide their [personal information](#) to," said Ryan Jarvi, a spokesperson for Attorney General Dana Nessel.

Eligible for COVID-19 vaccines right now in Michigan are health care workers, residents and employees of long-term care facilities, people ages 65 and older, teachers, child care workers, first-responders, law enforcement and corrections officers.

Anybody offering a chance to jump ahead on the statewide priority list for a vaccination in exchange for money is a scammer, the Federal Trade Commission warns.

"You can't pay to get your name on a list to get the vaccine," the agency said in a consumer blog post. "That's a scam. You can't pay to get early access to the vaccine. That's a scam. Nobody legit will call about the vaccine and ask for your Social Security, bank account or credit card number. That's a scam."

An FTC spokesman said Thursday that because the COVID-19 vaccines are so new—both Pfizer's and Moderna's vaccines were approved in mid-December—data about the prevalence of these scams isn't available yet. Still, the agency issued preemptive warnings about the possibility for fraud around the vaccines, which are in high demand in a nation that has reported 25.3 million coronavirus cases and more than 423,000 deaths, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

So did the Henry Ford Health System.

Bob Riney, the Detroit-based health system's president of health care operations and COO, made this statement Thursday: "People should be extremely vigilant and wary of vaccination offers that don't come from trusted sources like their doctor, [health care provider](#) or local health department.

"The plain fact is that there is no charge to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, which is being paid for by the federal government. You can't pay to put your name on a list to get the vaccine, or to get early access, and you don't need to provide sensitive personal information over the phone. Anyone promising that is trying to steal your personal or financial information, and very likely, your money."

A Henry Ford spokesman said Thursday that the health system isn't aware of any specific claims of fraud around COVID-19 vaccines in Michigan, but "we wanted to get this message out to let people know that these scams are out there and to be aware."

Riney cautioned people to be wary of any the following:

- Offers for early access to a vaccine upon payment of a deposit or fee.
- Requests asking for a payment to get a shot or to put your name on a COVID-19 vaccine waiting list.
- Unsolicited emails, telephone calls, or texts from someone claiming to be from a medical office, [insurance company](#) or COVID-19 vaccine center requesting personal, financial and/or medical information to determine your eligibility to participate in clinical vaccine trials or obtain the vaccine.
- Claims of Food and Drug Administration approval for a vaccine that cannot be verified.
- Ads for vaccines through social media platforms, email, telephone calls, online, or from unsolicited/unknown sources.
- A phone call or email telling you the government or government officials require you to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

People also should be aware that some tricksters may pretend to be [health care workers](#) to try to get access to valuable information, calling, texting or even knocking on doors to try to fool people who are eager to get a vaccine that's in short supply, he said.

"Our team members would never call to ask for your sensitive personal and financial information," Riney said. "Anyone who receives a call like this from someone who identifies themselves as being from Henry Ford should just hang up."

Complaints of fraud can be reported to the FTC at ReportFraud.ftc.gov or through the state Attorney General's Office at www.michigan.gov/ag.

The FTC offers these tips:

- 1.) Contact a trusted source for information. Check with state or local health departments, your health care provider or pharmacist to learn when and how to get the COVID-19 vaccine.
- 2.) Don't pay to sign up for the vaccine. Anyone who asks for a payment to put you on a list, to make an appointment for you, or reserve a spot in line is a scammer.
- 3.) Ignore sales ads for the COVID-19 vaccine. You can't buy a vaccine. It is only available at federal- and state-approved locations.
- 4.) Watch for unexpected or unusual texts. If your health care provider or pharmacist has used text messages to contact you in the past, you might get a text message about a COVID-19 vaccine. If you get a text, call your health care provider or pharmacist directly to make sure the message is legitimate. Scammers are texting, too. So don't click on links in text messages—especially messages you didn't expect.
- 5.) Don't open emails, attachments, or links from people you don't know or that come unexpectedly. You could download dangerous malware onto your computer or phone.
- 6.) Don't share information with people you don't know. No one from a vaccine distribution site, health care provider's office, pharmacy, insurance company or Medicare, will call, text, or email you asking for your Social Security, credit card, or bank account number to sign you up to get the vaccine.

In Michigan, there are several ways to register to get a [coronavirus](#) vaccine when you are eligible.

A federal pharmacy partnership with CVS and Walgreens pharmacies are handling immunizations for living and working in long-term care facilities.

For senior citizens ages 65 and older, health officials suggest the best way to register for a [vaccine](#) is to sign up through your local hospital system using an online patient portal, such as My Chart, through a Meijer or Kroger pharmacy, or

through your local health department.

Hospitals are handling COVID-19 immunizations for their employees and county health departments and hospitals are also vaccinating people who work in private practice or offices independent of hospitals.

Vaccines for teachers, law enforcement officers and other first-responders are being handled by their employers in conjunction with local health departments.

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