BBB Consumer Alert: Protecting Your Home From Title Transfer Fraud!

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Most homeowners worry about break-ins, storm damage, or costly repairs. Few realize that criminals may be able to steal a home without ever setting foot on the property.

Title transfer fraud – sometimes called deed fraud or home title theft – occurs when scammers use stolen personal information and forged documents to fraudulently transfer property ownership. Once ownership records are altered, criminals may attempt to take out loans against the property's equity or even sell the property to an unsuspecting buyer.

While any property can be targeted, criminals often target properties that may be less actively monitored, such as vacant homes, rental properties, vacation homes, or homes owned outright without a mortgage. Once fraudulent ownership documents are recorded, the scammer may attempt to borrow against the property's equity or sell the property to an unsuspecting buyer.

While this type of fraud is relatively uncommon, it appears to be growing, and the financial consequences can be devastating. Because many victims don't discover the fraud until significant damage has been done, regular monitoring is critical.

Here are some of the warning signs your Better Business Bureau (BBB) recommends you watch for:

- Unexpected mail regarding mortgages, loans, or liens you did not authorize.
- Property tax notices that stop arriving or begin showing unfamiliar information.
- Notices regarding changes in ownership, deeds, or recorded documents.
- Collection notices related to debts secured by your property.
- Individuals inquiring about purchasing or viewing property you are not selling.
- Unfamiliar activity appearing in public property records.

The sooner suspicious activity is identified, the easier it may be to address.

Here are several proactive steps that our team at BBB suggests to help you reduce your risk of becoming a victim of title transfer fraud:

- **Protect your personal information.** Many title fraud schemes begin with identity theft. Secure sensitive documents, use strong passwords, and be cautious about sharing personal information online or in response to unsolicited requests.
- **Monitor your property records periodically**. Many county Register of Deeds offices provide online access to public records, allowing homeowners to verify that ownership information remains accurate.
- **Review financial and tax-related correspondence carefully.** You don't want to ignore unexpected notices from lenders, tax authorities, or government agencies. Be sure to contact their office at a verified number if you receive anything indicating your property deed has been compromised.
- **Consider freezing your credit**. A credit freeze can make it more difficult for criminals to open new accounts using your information.
- Homeowners should also periodically review public property records to ensure ownership information remains accurate.

Many counties have launched a property alert system that notifies users whenever a document is recorded that matches their registered name, business name, or property address. This service can provide an early warning if suspicious activity appears in county records.

Here are steps we recommend if you suspect you're the victim of title transfer fraud:

- Contact your local county clerk's office and request copies of any suspicious documents.
- File a report with local law enforcement.
- Report identity theft through the Federal Trade Commission's IdentityTheft.gov website.
- Our BBB also recommends notifying financial institutions and placing fraud alerts or freezes on your credit reports if personal information may have been compromised.

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Kelvin Collins is president & CEO of the Better Business Bureau serving the Fall Line Corridor, serving 77 counties in East Alabama, West Georgia, Southwest Georgia, Central Georgia, East Georgia, and Western South Carolina. This tips column is provided through the local BBB and the International Association of Better Business Bureaus (IABBB). The Better Business Bureau sets standards for ethical business behavior, monitors compliance and helps consumers identify trustworthy businesses. Questions or complaints about a specific company or charity should be referred directly to the BBB at Phone: 1-800-763-4222, Web site: BBB.org or E-mail: info@centralgeorgia.bbb.org.