Don't Be Fooled by "Free" Gas and Grocery Card Postcards!

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With the cost of groceries and fuel continuing to strain many household budgets, it's no surprise that consumers are eager to take advantage of legitimate savings opportunities. Unfortunately, scammers know this too, and they're increasingly using the U.S. mail to lure people with promises of free gas and grocery gift cards.

Better Business Bureau (BBB) has recently received multiple reports through our BBB Scam Tracker page from individuals who received postcards claiming they qualified for valuable gas and grocery cards and vouchers.

One resident recently reported their experience with this type of mailing from "AAPP." The resident reported that he received a postcard claiming that $309.64 of gas and grocery vouchers were being held in his name.

He noted that he did some research and was taken to BBB's Scam Tracker page to learn more. However, others who didn't do their homework weren't as fortunate. Instead, they found that when attempting to claim what sounded like valuable vouchers, they got tricked into spending money.

Here's what one woman shared: *"Sister received a postcard from **AAPP**, Presorted 1st class mail from Tampa phone #. Postcard stated she was eligible for gas & grocery cards. She agreed to the $5 processing fee, then immediately after, they took another $46. Total dollars lost: $51."*

The use of a costly postcard can make the offer appear authentic, but also shows just how much money can be earned by taking advantage of unsuspecting individuals. These scams often target thousands of consumers, and even modest unauthorized charges can quickly add up for criminals.

The postcards may include official-looking barcodes, tracking numbers, expiration dates, and customer service phone numbers to create a false sense of credibility. Some even use urgent language to pressure consumers into responding quickly before they have time to research the offer. These can include: "Limited time offer," or "Final notice."

In addition to groceries or gas, these types of mailings may claim to offer rebates or shopping rewards. Recipients are usually instructed to call a phone number or visit a website to claim their reward, and as noted in the example above, callers are usually asked to pay a fee, which may be referenced as a small processing, activation, shipping, or handling fee – often around $5 – to receive hundreds of dollars in gift cards or vouchers.

Once payment information is provided, one of several things may happen:

- Additional unauthorized charges appear on the consumer's account.
- The consumer is unknowingly enrolled in a monthly subscription program.
- The promised gift cards never arrive, or low-value coupons or promotional materials are received instead.
- The company becomes difficult – or impossible – to contact for refunds.

Your BBB recommends taking these precautions:

Remember that legitimate prizes don't require you to pay first. If someone asks for a processing fee, activation fee, shipping charge, or any other upfront payment before you receive your reward, consider it a major warning sign.

Research the company independently. Don't rely solely on the information printed on a postcard. Research the company's name along with words like "BBB," "reviews," or "scam." Visit BBB.org to check the company's Business Profile, customer reviews, and complaint history.

Never provide payment information under pressure. If you're told you must act immediately, slow down. Legitimate companies won't pressure you into making an immediate payment.

Watch your bank and credit card statements carefully. If you've already provided payment information, review your accounts for unauthorized charges and report suspicious transactions to your financial institution immediately.

Be cautious with personal information. Even if the fee is small, scammers may also be trying to collect your address, date of birth, banking information, or other personal details that could be used for future fraud.

If you receive a questionable postcard or believe you've been targeted by this type of scam, we hope you'll report it to BBB Scam Tracker at **BBB.org/ScamTracker**. Your report can help warn others in your community and provide valuable information about emerging scam trends.

If you've already lost money, contact your bank or credit card company as soon as possible to dispute unauthorized charges. You should also report the incident to your state's consumer protection office and the Federal Trade Commission at **ReportFraud.ftc.gov**.

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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.