



STATE OF MARYLAND

DHMH PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Maryland Restaurants and Food Service Businesses Beware Fake Health Inspectors Attempting to “Set-up” Apparent Scams

Con Artists May Seek Cash Payments, Business Owners Urged to Check Credentials

Baltimore, MD (April 22, 2011) – With a potential scam reminiscent of past schemes to defraud local restaurants and other food service companies, unidentified confidence artists are calling local businesses, identifying themselves as state food or health inspectors and seeking to schedule inspections. As part of the scam, these callers provide a “code number” that the facility operator or manager can use for identification purposes according to the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH).

“None of it is real,” said Joshua M. Sharfstein M.D., DHMH Secretary. “This is not how the state or your local health departments work with local food establishments.”

To date there no reports of these fake inspections or appointments being kept. In the recent past, con artists identifying themselves as food or health inspectors have contacted local bars and restaurants by phone or email seeking to coerce the food facilities into purchasing expensive posters to avoid violating a non-existent state regulation.

Federal officials report similar incidents have occurred in a number of states over the last two years. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration Baltimore District Office has relayed reports of the potential scams in Maryland to its Office of Criminal Investigations.

“All restaurant and food service operators in Maryland should know that this scam is still around,” said Frances Phillips, DHMH Deputy Secretary for Public Health Services. “If you have any doubt about an inspector who tries to schedule an appointment, call us or your local law enforcement immediately.”

While owners and operators of any food service business in Maryland, such as a bar or restaurant, are normally aware of the local agencies and personnel who routinely conduct inspections, they should be alert for signs of this latest scam. The food service business owner/operator needs to know:

- Under no circumstances will a genuine food inspector asked for a payment, either for posters, on-the-spot fines or any other services.

- This manner of operation (scheduling appointments by phone; using code numbers for identification) is not consistent with the current operating practices of food inspectors at the federal, state or local levels.
- When an inspector visits a food facility, the inspector should be asked to show their identification, as Federal, State and Local Jurisdiction inspectors all carry appropriate identification.
- If there are any doubts about the identity of an inspector, the facility operator can contact its Local Health Department, the State Office of Food Protection and Consumer Health Services (410-767-8400) or the FDA Baltimore District Office (410-779-5455) to verify the inspector's identity.
- If there is any cause for concern, the food facility operator should contact local law enforcement.

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