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# Is that debt collector for real?

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It's stressful enough getting calls from debt collectors for bills you actually owe. But if you've ever been harassed and threatened for debts you've never even heard about, let alone accrued, it can be downright harrowing – and quite possibly illegal.

Today, the FTC announced that a U.S. district court has temporarily halted a Georgia-based operation from using deception and threats to collect millions in phantom payday loan “debts.” The FTC says Williams, Scott & Associates and company president John Williams lied and threatened people to pay on debts they didn't owe – or debts the company didn't have the authority to collect.

According to the FTC, the debt collectors claimed to be federal and state agents, investigators, or members of a government fraud task force, or they pretended to be with a law firm. They falsely told consumers their driver's licenses would be revoked and that they faced immediate arrest and imprisonment if they didn't pay up. How did the debt collectors even know to contact those consumers? The FTC says many of the people had inquired about a payday loan online at one time and submitted contact information, which the company later got its hands on. The case is pending in federal court in Atlanta.

Don't get intimidated by a bullying bill collector – real or fake. Any debt collector impersonating a law enforcement officer or threatening you with immediate arrest if you don't pay up is violating federal law.

If you think a caller may be a fake debt collector:

- **Ask the caller for his name, company, street address, and telephone number.** Tell the caller you won't discuss any debt until you get a written "validation notice." If the caller refuses, don't pay.
- **Put your request in writing.** If you have the caller's address, send a letter demanding that the caller stop contacting you, and keep a copy for your files. The Fair Debt Collection Practices Act (FDCPA) requires any debt collector to stop calling if you ask them to in writing.

- **Don't give or confirm with the caller any personal, financial, or other sensitive information.** Fake debt collectors, and other scammers, can use your information to commit identity theft and other crimes.
- **Contact your creditor.** If a debt is legitimate – but you think the collector isn't – contact your creditor. Tell them about the suspicious call and ask who, if anyone, the creditor has authorized to collect the debt.
- **Report the call.** File a complaint with the FTC and your state Attorney General's office with information about suspicious callers. Many states have their own debt collection laws in addition to the federal FDCPA.

Learn more about protecting yourself from fake debt collectors and about your rights if you actually are facing debt collection.

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