

# Watch Out for COVID-19 Contact Tracing Scams

By the GWAAR Legal Services Team

Public health workers use contact tracing to track the spread of an infectious disease. Workers interview people who have the disease and ask them for the names and phone numbers of everyone they have been in contact with during the time they were contagious. Then, they alert anyone who may have been exposed. The names of people who test positive are kept confidential. The workers will ask about symptoms, offer testing, and discuss steps like quarantine and treatment. These workers usually work for a state or county department of public health. Health departments have used contact tracing for decades to stop the spread of infectious disease.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) says that contact tracers will always identify themselves as representatives of state or local public health departments. They will reach out to you by phone, text, or email, depending on the contact information they have for you. If they contact you, they will verify that they are speaking to the correct person before they even begin to talk about contact tracing. Once they confirm that they are speaking with the right person, they will explain why they are contacting you.

They will tell you that you have been exposed, but they will not identify the person you were in contact with or where you might have been exposed.

Contact tracers will ask you for:

- Your name, address, phone number & email address
- Your occupation and work status
- Your gender, race and ethnicity
- Whether you have any symptoms

Then, the contact tracer will explain quarantine recommendations and sign you up for self-monitoring. Contact tracers will not ask you for information like your Social Security, bank account, or credit card number.

In addition, they will never send you a text message or email with a link to click. You can always verify the identity of contact tracing staff by calling your local health department and asking to be connected directly to the contact tracer.

All contact tracers have received training in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which protects patient privacy, and the Wisconsin Electronic Disease Surveillance

System (WEDSS). WEDSS is the secure system that handles the reporting, investigation, and monitoring of the information contact tracers receive.

Unfortunately, scammers are pretending to be contact tracers and taking advantage of this process. Some scammers use robocalls that try to get you to speak to someone posing as a contact tracer who wants to verify your personal information. Other scammers send text messages that ask you to click a link.

If you receive a robocall, hang up immediately without responding. Do not press any buttons, even if they prompt you to “Press 1 to be removed from our list.” By speaking or pressing a button the scammer knows this line has someone on the other end, which in turn may increase the calls.

If you receive a message via text, email, or through social media from someone claiming to be a contact tracer, don’t click the link. This is a “phishing” scam. Clicking on the link will download software onto your device that may give scammers access to your personal and financial information. Ignore and delete these scam messages.

If you have been contacted by someone you think was not a legitimate contact tracer, please alert the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection:  
DATCPHotline@Wisconsin.gov or (800) 422-7128.

You can also contact the National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) Hotline at 1-866-720-5721. Alternatively, you can fill out the NCDF web complaint form online at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/webform/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form> . You can also contact your local county health department.

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