

Social Security Column

IF IT'S NOT .GOV, IT'S NOT SOCIAL SECURITY

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When you go on a road trip, you need to follow the signs to arrive at the right place. Going online can be very much the same. Look for the “.gov” at the end of the web address — if it isn't .gov, it isn't the real Social Security website — www.socialsecurity.gov.

Countless consumers nationwide are victimized each year by misleading advertisers who use "Social Security" or "Medicare" to entice the public to use their services. In many cases, these companies offer Social Security services for a fee, even though the same services are available directly from Social Security, free of charge. These services include:

- updating a Social Security card to show a bride's married name;
- replacing a Social Security card; and
- getting a Social Security number for a child.

These for-profit businesses may cleverly design their websites, so when people use Internet search engines, their advertisement pops up. They may even make their advertisement look similar to the real Social Security website. And some of these sites, at first glance, appear to be affiliated with Social Security. But upon closer examination, these are for-profit companies charging individuals for a service that is provided free by Social Security.

For instance, a quick Google search on “replacing a Social Security card” brings up paid advertisements for websites that charge a fee just to get an application for a new card. That service is absolutely free from Social Security.

The law that deals specifically with misleading Social Security and Medicare advertising prohibits people or non-government organizations, like for-profit businesses, from using words or emblems that mislead others. Their advertising cannot lead people to believe that they represent or are somehow affiliated with or endorsed or approved by Social Security or the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (Medicare). But that doesn't stop advertisers from trying.

For more information, you can read our publication *What You Need to Know about Misleading Advertising* at www.socialsecurity.gov/pubs/10005.html.

When you go to www.socialsecurity.gov, make sure you look for the “.gov” sign along the way. Don't be tricked into paying a fee for a service that's free. And remember: if it isn't .gov, it isn't Social Security.

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