

# **e**FLORIDA CONSUMER **NEWSLETTER**

March 2021

**[www.FloridaConsumerHelp.com](http://www.FloridaConsumerHelp.com)**

**435-7352**  
**1-800-HELP-FLA**

**352-9832**  
**1-800-FL-AYUDA**

## **NCWM ANNOUNCES WEIGHTS AND MEASURES WEEK: MARCH 1 - 7, 2021**

The [National Conference on Weights and Measures](#) (NCWM) announces Weights and Measures Week, March 1 - 7, 2021. These dates are designated every year to commemorate President John Adams's signing of the first United States weights and measures law on March 2, 1799.



NCWM Chairman Hal Prince of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services announced his theme for the year, “*Measuring Up to the New Normal.*”

Some of the new normal in commercial weighing and measuring includes taximeters using GPS to measure distance traveled, charging stations replacing fuel dispensers, and ecommerce replacing trips to the store.

“There really is a new normal and we have seen it coming for a while now,” said Prince. “Consumer buying preferences are changing and the business community is adapting. There was far less face-to-face interaction with a local merchant, even before the pandemic. But the pandemic has rocketed the move to e-commerce to the forefront!”



**Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services**

As the marketplace evolves, regulators and industry must work together to keep up with those changes through quality standards. NCWM has provided the forum for that cooperative for over a century. “New products, devices and methods of sale are coming into the marketplace as never before, elevating the importance of fair standards and equity in all transactions to an all-time high,” commented Prince.

The NCWM is a professional nonprofit association of state and local weights and measures officials, federal agencies, manufacturers, retailers, and consumers. NCWM has developed United States weights and measures standards for commerce since 1905. The organization brings the right interests together to keep pace with innovative advancements in the marketplace.

## PRODUCT PACKAGING

FDACS regulates all commodities sold by weight, such as deli meat, to ensure that consumers are provided the full amount of what is paid for. The department has adopted national standards established by the National Institute of Standards and Technology to insure consistency and accuracy in measurements.

To better serve consumers, package labels must comply with certain standards. Information on package labeling must be displayed plainly and clearly, and the lettering color must conspicuously contrast with the background color.



The required information falls into the following three categories:

- 1. Identity of the commodity in the package.** The product identity must appear on the principal display panel of the package and must be: the name required by federal or state regulation; the common or usual name; or the generic name or other appropriate description, including a statement of function.
- 2. The name and place of the business that will be responsible for the product and the package.** If the responsible party is not the manufacturer, then the label should reveal the responsible party's connection to the package, such as “Manufactured for and packed by,” or “Distributed by.”
- 3. How much of the product is in the package in terms of weight, measure, or count.** This must appear on the principal display panel of the product package. Product packaging, referred to as “tare,” should not be included in the price of products sold by weight.

Proper packaging and consumer awareness can play a major role in maintaining a fair marketplace. For more information about product packaging or to file a complaint, consumers can call 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) or go to [www.FloridaConsumerHelp.com](http://www.FloridaConsumerHelp.com).



# PETROLEUM INSPECTION, SAMPLING, AND TESTING

With dedicated inspectors and laboratory staff across the state of Florida, FDACS has a petroleum inspection program that monitors the accuracy of gas pumps and the quality of fuel sold. Through the Bureau of Standards, the department regularly performs inspections of petroleum distribution systems and analyzes petroleum product samples.

The department's petroleum inspectors ensure that Florida consumers are purchasing fuel from facilities where dispensers are labeled correctly, functioning safely and properly, and are secure, as well as investigating claims of fraud to protect Florida's consumers. The combined total number of petroleum facilities inspected in 2019 and 2020 was an astounding 35,786 facilities.

The Fuel and Fluid Laboratories at FDACS provide the consumers of Florida with unbiased, accurate, and accountable laboratory service and analysis. All combustion engines depend on suitable fuel and other lubricants that meet regulatory specifications and are free from substandard contaminants. The department's laboratory analysts conducted over 30,000 petroleum and alternative quality tests in 2020 on products including gasoline blended up to 15% of ethanol, ethanol free gasoline, diesel fuel, biodiesel, kerosene, ethanol fuel blends commonly known as E85, antifreeze, and brake fluid.

Consumers should call 1-800-HELP-FLA (352-7352) or 1-800-FL-AYUDA (352-9832) for Spanish speakers to report any problems at the pump.



# NATIONAL CONSUMER PROTECTION WEEK:

## FEBRUARY 28 - MARCH 6, 2021

Consumer protection and education are a full-time effort for the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and its partners like FDACS. Each year during the first full week of March, the FTC marks National Consumer Protection Week (NCPW). This is a time to highlight the resources available to consumers and to help them understand their consumer rights and make well-informed decisions.

FDACS provides a variety of resources at [www.FloridaConsumerHelp.com](http://www.FloridaConsumerHelp.com) to protect Florida consumers and provide the information they need to help themselves and their families avoid becoming a victim of fraud. These resources include:

### **A to Z Resource Guide**

Subject Name:

[Español](#)

**SEARCH**

[Advanced Search](#)

The [A to Z Resource Guide](#) is an online directory of government related information designed to inform, educate and assist Florida's consumers. The guide directs consumers toward the most appropriate resource for assistance.

### **FIND A BUSINESS OR INDIVIDUAL License / Complaint Lookup** \*AS MAINTAINED BY THE DIVISION OF CONSUMER SERVICES

NEW: search STO - Student Tour Operators, in Program dropdown

|                      |                      |   |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|---|----------------------|
| Name                 | License (ex. LS9999) | Phone   | City                 |
| <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/>                                    | <input type="text"/> |
| County               | Program              | <input type="checkbox"/> Limit results by Active status |                      |
| <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> | <b>SEARCH</b> <b>CLEAR ALL</b>                          |                      |

The [Business/Complaint Lookup](#) is an online resource that allows consumers to find registration and complaint information in real-time.





Check-A-Charity is a resource that provides the financial information reported to the department from charitable organizations. The information in Check-A-Charity is provided as a public service. To search an organization, type in the organization's complete or partial name in the text box below and click the "Search" button.

Business Name:

License/Registration Number:  [Advanced Search](#)

[Check-A-Charity](#) is an online, searchable database that provides registration and financial information from charitable organizations soliciting within or from the state of Florida (excluding religious, educational, political, and governmental agencies).



## File a Complaint




[File a Complaint](#) online or request to have a complaint form mailed to you by calling the Consumer Assistance Center at 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) or 1-800-FL-AYUDA (352-9832).



Join the [Florida Do Not Call List](#) or report unwanted sales calls.





### Request a Consumer Protection Speaker

We have the latest information on scams that bilk people out of millions of dollars annually. At your next event or meeting, let one of our representatives educate your group on the latest consumer issues. We're here for you and we're FREE! [Request a speaker.](#)

[Request a Speaker](#), at no cost, for your community or club meeting. At your next virtual event or meeting, let one of our consumer protection representatives join in and educate your group on the latest consumer issues.



## Scams and Fraud



Learn about common scams and ways you can protect yourself by visiting [Scams and Frauds](#). An alert and informed consumer is the best defense against fraud and deception.



FDACS is the state's clearinghouse for consumer complaints, protection and information. Consumers who believe fraud has taken place can contact the department's Consumer Assistance Center (CAC). The CAC staff is available to provide consumers with information and assistance from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday, at 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) or 1-800-FL-AYUDA (352-9832) or via Live Chat at [www.FDACS.gov](http://www.FDACS.gov).



# UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS FRAUD

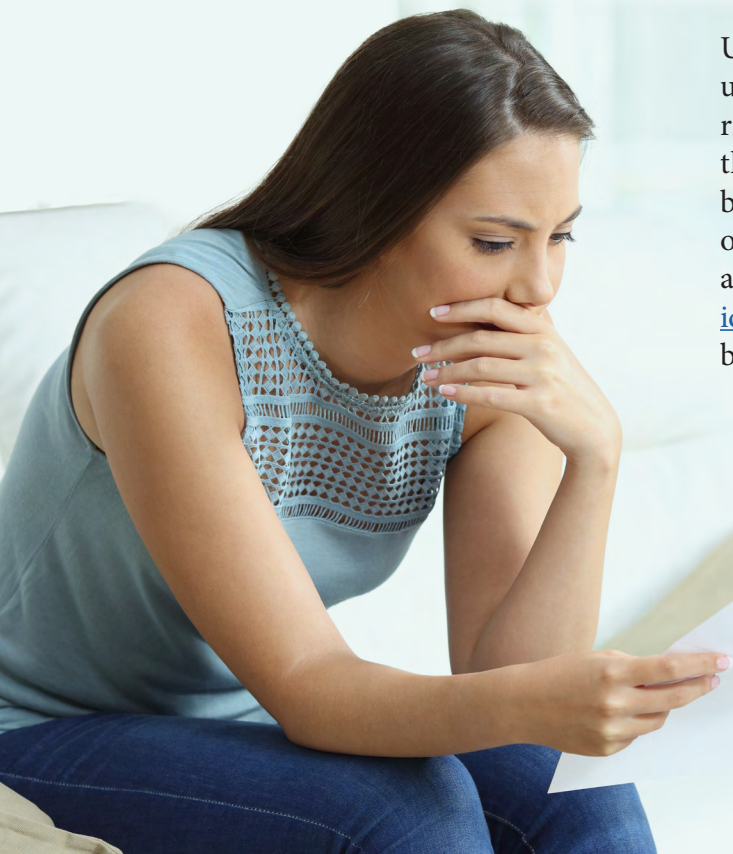
Tax season is well underway with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) beginning to accept and process 2020 tax returns on February 12. While most consumers look for their W-2 forms for wages and 1099 forms for non-wage income, some consumers may find themselves victims of identity theft in the form of Form 1099-G fraud or unemployment benefits fraud.

The IRS Form 1099-G is most commonly used to report unemployment compensation, as well as any state or local income tax refunds an individual received in a given year. Unemployment compensation is generally taxable income. The Form 1099-G is generated by the government agency that paid those benefits, so the recipient of those benefits will know the amount that must be reported on their tax return.

What if you received a Form 1099-G but you neither applied for nor received unemployment compensation benefits? The [Identity Theft Resource Center](#) (ITRC) recently reported already receiving phone calls and live-chats from victims stating they received a Form 1099-G in error and wondering what to do next. These are issues the ITRC and IRS discussed on a recent episode of [The Fraudian Slip](#), the ITRC's podcast where they talk about all-things identity compromise, crime, and fraud, including the impact identity theft issues have on people and businesses.



Unemployment benefits fraud is not a new thing, but the rise in unemployment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic led to a rise in unemployment benefits fraud in 2020. In an average year, the ITRC reports it is contacted by fewer than 20 unemployment benefit fraud victims. However, in 2020, more than 700 victims of unemployment benefits fraud reached out to the ITRC, and more than 6,000 consumers visited the company website, [idtheftcenter.org](https://idtheftcenter.org), to find information about unemployment benefits fraud.





The US Department of Labor's [Inspector General](#) has informed Congress that as much as \$26 billion or more in fraudulent pandemic-related unemployment benefits have been paid. The National Unemployment Insurance Fraud Task Force issued a [consumer protection guide](#) providing information and resources for individuals on how to protect themselves from this type of fraud and steps they can take if they have had their identity exploited by criminals.

As staggering as the 2020 numbers for unemployment benefits fraud are anticipated to be, the number of people who find out they were impacted by the fraud could rise even more once the Form 1099-Gs start hitting mailboxes. While states are aware of many fraudulent payments, some fraudulent unemployment benefits may have gone undetected. The IRS expects to see a rise in the number of taxpayers that contest their 1099-G forms claiming they did not receive any unreported income from government benefits.

What should consumers do if they receive an inaccurate Form 1099-G?

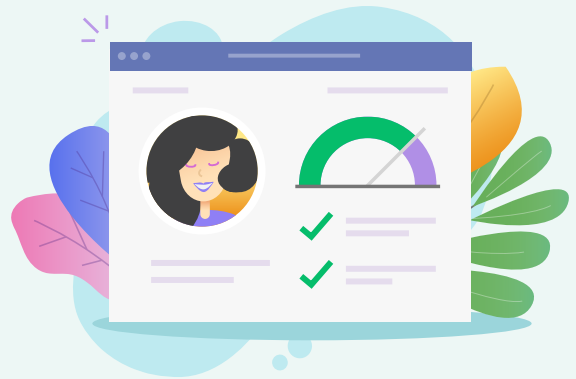
- **Contact the state(s) that issued the 1099-G.** The IRS advises taxpayers who receive an incorrect Form 1099-G for unemployment benefits they did not receive to contact the issuing state agency and request a revised Form 1099-G showing they did not receive these benefits. A corrected Form 1099-G showing zero unemployment benefits in cases of identity theft will help taxpayers avoid being hit with an unexpected federal tax bill for unreported income. Taxpayers who cannot obtain a timely, corrected form from states should still file an accurate tax return, reporting only the income they actually received. Taxpayers do not need to file a Form 14039, Identity Theft Affidavit, with the IRS regarding an incorrect Form 1099-G. The identity theft affidavit should be filed only if the taxpayer's e-filed return is rejected because a return using the same Social Security number already has been filed.
- **Notify your current employer.** If you are presently working, notify your employer of the fraudulent claim, because they will also need to file documentation.





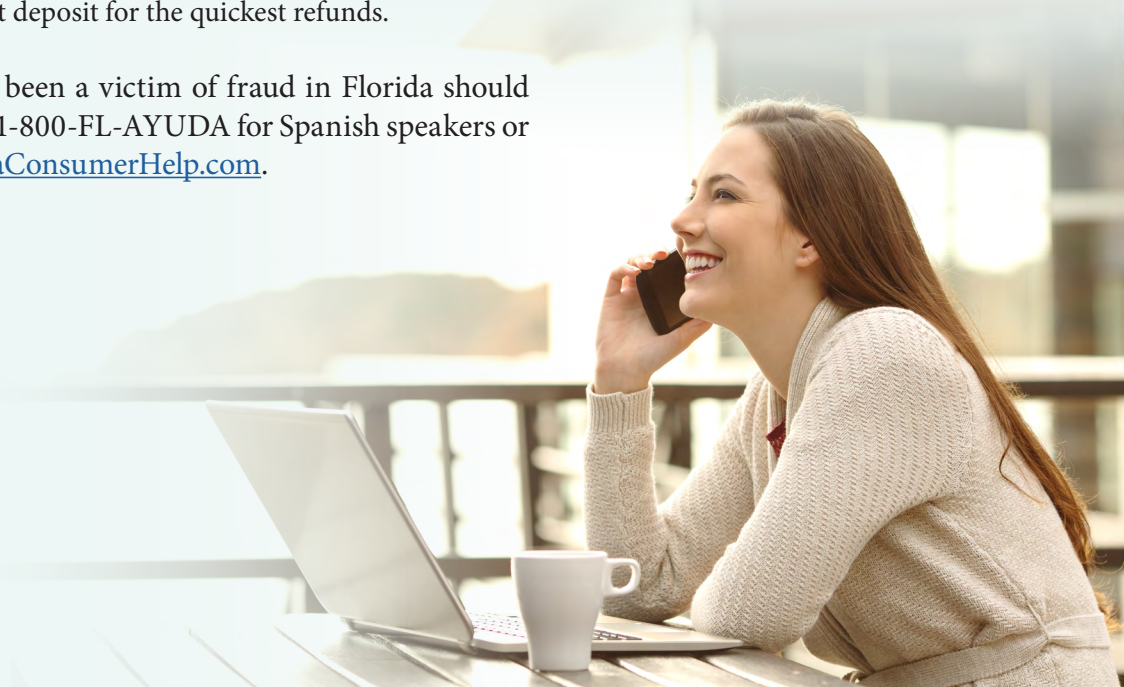
What else can consumers do to protect themselves from fraud?

- **Do not share your personally identifiable information (PII) with unknown third parties.** If someone you don't know asks for your PII in order to perform some service for you, beware that the offer of services may be a scheme to collect your PII and use it for illegal purposes.
- **Follow good computer hygiene and cybersecurity practices.** Ensure that the passwords to all of your financial and other accounts are unique and sufficiently complex; and change those passwords often. Wherever you can, add a second factor for authentication, such as a cell phone number, a security token, or a biometric factor, such as a fingerprint or facial scan.
- **Take advantage of credit monitoring services if you have been notified your information was exposed in a data breach.** If you do not have access to credit monitoring, use [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com), where you can get a free credit report from each credit reporting bureau once each year.
- **Place a freeze on your credit to prohibit any new credit applications from being opened in your name.** Visit the Federal Trade Commission's [credit freeze guide](#) for instructions.



- **Apply for the IP PIN.** The IRS now allows any taxpayer who can verify their identity to seek an “Identity Protection PIN.” The IP PIN can be used when filing an income tax return to help prevent cybercriminals from filing fake tax returns. Consumers can visit [IRS.gov](https://www.irs.gov) and click on the [Identity Theft Protection link](#) at the bottom of the home page to apply for the IP PIN. While it does not prevent unemployment benefits fraud that already occurred from impacting their tax return, it can still protect them from tax identity theft.
- **File taxes early.** While this tip does not apply to unemployment benefits fraud, it is always a good idea for people to file their taxes as soon as possible to reduce the likelihood of a criminal beating them to it. The [IRS says](#) consumers should file electronically and use direct deposit for the quickest refunds.

Anyone who believes they have been a victim of fraud in Florida should report it at 1-800-HELP-FLA or 1-800-FL-AYUDA for Spanish speakers or file a complaint online at [FloridaConsumerHelp.com](http://FloridaConsumerHelp.com).



# TERMITE AWARENESS WEEK

Termite Awareness Week is March 7-13, 2021. Termites cause billions of dollars of damage annually in the United States and in many cases the damage they cause goes undetected in areas behind walls, in the crawlspace, or in the attic. This article provides tips for choosing a pest control company, choosing a termite or wood destroying organism (WDO) contract, and termite prevention measures to take around your home.

FDACS recommends that you hire a licensed pest control company for termite protection around your home. You can find out if a company is licensed in Florida by using the [Pest Control Database Search](#) on the department's website. You can also check to find out how many complaints have been filed against a particular company by using the [Business Complaint Lookup](#) tool on the department's [Consumer Resources](#) page.

When you receive termite treatment or protection from a licensed pest control company you will be issued a WDO contract. There are three types of WDO contracts: spot or one-time treatment, retreat only and retreat and repair. Every company will have its own contract, coverage and conditions that could void the contract. Make sure to read the entire contract and fully understand it before signing. It is important to find out what termite species are covered, what structures on your property are included, and the duration of the coverage. In addition, you will want to find out what conducive conditions (or termite attracting conditions) could void your contract.

Even if you have hired a pest control company, you must also do your part to protect your home from termites. Here are a few simple tips:

- Reduce moisture on and around your home. Moisture is a conducive condition for termites and can include leaking exterior faucets and AC drain lines.
- Keep plant material and mulch away from your home foundation.
- Home siding material should not make direct contact with soil against foundation.
- Repair cracks and leaks around your home and roof.
- If you have a termite control treatment made to the soil around your home, avoid disturbing the treated soil along the foundation.

For more information and tips visit our [Termites](#) page at [www.FDACS.gov](http://www.FDACS.gov).





# ABOUT THE FDACS DIVISION OF CONSUMER SERVICES

FDACS is Florida's state consumer protection agency responsible for regulating charities and handling consumer complaints. FDACS handles more than 400,000 consumer complaints and inquiries, oversees more than 500,000 regulated devices, entities, and products like gas pumps and grocery scales, performs over 61,000 lab analyses on products like gasoline and brake fluid, performs nearly 9,000 fair ride inspections, and returned over \$2.8 million to consumers through mediations with businesses.



The Division of Food Safety monitors food from the point of manufacturing and distribution through wholesale and retail sales to ensure the public of safe, wholesome and properly represented food products.

**CLICK THE ICON ABOVE TO SEE THE LATEST RECALLS, MARKET WITHDRAWALS, & SAFETY ALERTS.**



The Consumer Product Safety Commission provides consumer product recall information as part of the agency's mission to protect consumers and families from hazardous products.

**CLICK THE ICON ABOVE TO SEE THE LATEST RECALLS, MARKET WITHDRAWALS, & SAFETY ALERTS.**

*The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is the state's clearinghouse for consumer complaints, protection and information. Consumers who would like information about filing a complaint against a business or who believe fraud has taken place can visit us online at [FloridaConsumerHelp.com](https://www.floridacconsumerhelp.com) or contact the department's consumer protection and information hotline by calling 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) or 1-800-FL-AYUDA (352-9832) for Spanish speakers.*