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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: March 27, 2020

TO: MEDIA MEMBERS

FROM: Stephen M. Wagstaffe, District Attorney

SUBJECT: Be Alert for Scams During the COVID-19 Emergency

San Mateo County District Attorney Stephen M. Wagstaffe today advised San Mateo County residents and businesses to be alert for scams related to the novel coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic.

Unfortunately, it is common for scammers to exploit the uncertainty and anxiety associated with emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic to take people's money or steal their identities. Scams reported to law enforcement agencies throughout the country include:

- Scammers selling fake at-home test kits;
- Scammers soliciting donations for individuals, groups, and areas affected by COVID-19;
- Scammers offering to sell fake cures, vaccines, and advice on unproven treatments for COVID-19;
- Scammers creating fake businesses, websites, social media accounts, and email addresses claiming to sell medical supplies currently in high demand, such as surgical masks. When consumers attempt to purchase supplies, the crooks keep the money and never provide the merchandise;

- Scammers posing as national and global health authorities, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), sending phishing emails designed to trick recipients into downloading malware or providing personal identifying and financial information;

Residents and businesses can protect themselves from becoming victims of COVID -19 related scams by doing the following:

- Rely on medical information only from trusted sources, such as their personal health care providers and county, state and federal public health officials;
- Independently verify the identity of any company, charity, or individual that contacts you regarding COVID-19;
- Be cautious of unsolicited emails offering information, supplies, or treatment for COVID-19 or requesting your personal information for medical purposes. Legitimate health authorities will not contact the public this way.
- Check online reviews of any company offering COVID-19 products or supplies. Verify that the URL/Web Address is correct as scammers will often create fake copies of websites where the URL is only slightly different. Avoid companies with complaints about not receiving items.
- Don't click on links or open email attachments from unknown or unverified sources. This could download a virus onto your computer or device.
- Research any charities or crowdfunding sites soliciting donations in connection with COVID-19 before giving. An organization may not be legitimate even if it uses words like "CDC" or "government" in its name or has reputable looking seals or logos on its materials. For resources on donating wisely, visit the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) website. <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/audio-video/video/make-your-donations-count>
- Ignore offers for a COVID-19 vaccine, cure, or treatment. If there is a medical breakthrough, you won't hear about it for the first time through an email, online ad, or unsolicited sales pitch.

A person who would like to report a COVID-19 related scam in San Mateo County should contact the District Attorney's Office by calling (650) 363-4651 or at <https://da.smcgov.org/consumer-and-environmental-protection> or calling the local police department.