

Why Monitoring Your Title in Any State Is Crucial in Preventing Generic Title Fraud

Ever heard of a “doppelganger?” In this common movie trope, a strange person identical to the main character begins wreaking all kinds of havoc.

Though it is an interesting idea, of course this sort of event would never happen in reality. That said, if you own a home, there is a very real risk of title fraud—and it is eerily similar to the doppelganger plot device described above.

Title fraud is a well-known and potentially devastating real estate scam here in the US. Anyone can be baited by these schemes, but certain types of individuals are often targeted. If you own your property free and clear, without a mortgage, you are more likely to be selected because there is no mortgage lender actively monitoring the title. Rental or vacant properties are also often chosen because the legal owner is likely not checking the property and any related documents on a regular basis. Lastly, any property with an owner who lives out of state is at risk for the same reasons.

According to the FBI’s [2023 Internet Crime Report](#), real estate schemes like title fraud caused more than \$145 million in losses across a total of 9,521 US adults. But how, exactly, are these scammers pulling the wool over people’s eyes?

Typically, title fraud starts with the criminal gathering information about their target. The necessary data, which includes the property’s address, legal description, and the name of the owner, is often publicly available. Next, the scammer will forge documents related to the property, such as mortgage papers, deeds, or transfer documents. They may even impersonate the owner or commit identity theft to appear more legitimate.

The fake documents are submitted to whichever government organization is responsible for recording property transactions in the local area. At this point, the title is officially transferred into the scammer’s control—whether it is put in their name or an accomplice’s, they now have legal ownership of the property.

Alternatively, the fraudster may also take a personal approach. In this scenario, they persuade the homeowner to sign legal documents, typically while posing as an employee of a mortgage company or real estate firm. Here is where the exploitation begins. Now, the criminal can sell your home to an unsuspecting buyer, take out a mortgage or loan against the property, or lease your home to collect rental income. They may also open a home equity line of credit (HELOC) and create a staggering debt for which you are legally responsible. While there are steps you can take at this stage to fight back against the scam, the old saying holds particularly true here: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

How Do You Avoid Title Fraud?

The best way to prevent title fraud from being carried out on any property you own is to be proactive. When you combine the right preventative measures with a healthy dose of vigilance, you can minimize your risk, no matter what state you live in or where your property is located.

First, keep track of your utility bills and mortgage payment notices if you have a mortgage. If bills that arrive at a regular cadence suddenly stop coming, or you receive property-related mail addressed to an unusual name, it may be a sign someone is tampering with your title.

In this digital age, it is also crucial to keep your personal information secure. Always be cautious about sharing your personal information online. Ensure all your login credentials for websites are secure by using strong passwords and changing them regularly. This seemingly minor detail can make a world of difference in terms of preventing title fraud. But do not forget to stay vigilant with physical documents as well. Shred important or identifying documents before you discard them and stay aware of any mail theft issues in areas near your property.

You may want to consider looking into a title insurance policy. These are designed to protect homeowners from financial loss related to title fraud, acting as a guardrail against a potentially devastating scam. Your policy can be set up to cover not just financial losses, but also your legal fees and other related expenses. This can be a very cost-effective way to minimize the risks of title fraud, and the fallout if you are ever a victim.

Lastly, one of the most effective things you can do is to routinely check both your credit report and online property records. About once per quarter is a good frequency. If you notice any unauthorized changes or suspicious activity, spend some time investigating for evidence of attempted fraud.

For our Palm Beach County clients:

Did you know that you can protect one of your most valuable assets with a free tool? Your Palm Beach County Clerk's office provides a free [Property Fraud Alert service](#) that takes just a few minutes to sign up for and can provide you peace of mind.

Palm Beach County is a busy real estate market, with a median single family home sale price of \$580,000 and more than 64,000 deeds recorded in 2023. High sales volumes and high home values make our area ground zero for real estate fraud. It is crucial to be cautious of potential scams.

[Registering](#) is easy. Enter a valid email address along with the address you would like to monitor in the county's free alert system. You will get an email alert with any activity linked to your name in their Official Records within 48 hours of document recording. You may monitor your personal name, including a nickname or different spellings of your name, business name, parcel control number or physical address. Any alert you receive will also include a link to view the actual document on the online Official Records website.

For assistance, contact the Clerk of the Circuit Court & Comptroller's Recording Department at (561) 355-2991 or PropertyFraudAlerts@mypalmbeachclerk.com.

As a wealth manager, we are *extremely* familiar with how to safeguard against title fraud—and the peace of mind that comes with it. Especially in these modern times, you just cannot put a price on the value of protecting your dearest assets.

So, know that we are here to help and offer advice on your specific situation anytime. Our recommendations are always custom-tailored to your goals, as well as your concerns related to title fraud.

We strive to provide you with world-class service every time, which includes:

- Prompt and effective communication,
- regular client meetings, and
- continuing education for our team members on the risks that affect you.

We want to offer our services to others just like you!

Please share this information with others!

Do you know someone who may benefit from this information?

If you would like to share this article with others, please call Asset Advisory Services at (561) 747-9550 and we would be happy to provide them this valuable information.



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