

Beware the bogus green-card-lottery e-mail

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Byline: By Michael Matza

Inquirer Staff Writer

Body

Overseas **e-mail** scams are so rife, there's probably one in your inbox right now.

In the latest ruse, hucksters masquerading as State Department officials are using **e-mails** designed to look like notifications from the U.S. Green Card Diversity Lottery Program in an attempt to extract up to \$1,500 from unsuspecting immigrants.

"Congratulations! You are among the lucky selected winners," reads a shamrock-green pitch now being circulated. Digitally embossed with the spread-eagle insignia of the State Department, it provides a correspondence address in Thailand and says that the winners eventually will have to pay fees of \$970 per individual, or \$1,490 per family, to "complete" the processing.

The targets could include citizens of foreign countries seeking to immigrate to the United States, as well as immigrants already here on temporary visas who hope someday to get green cards that would allow legal, permanent residency.

State Department spokesman Darby Holladay said the **bogus e-mail** was precisely the sort of scam that "has been an ongoing problem" for the visa program.

Holladay said he "could not immediately quantify" how many people had been taken in by the fraud.

On the department's Web site, a red-lettered warning is prominently featured: "Some companies posing as the U.S. Government have sought money in order to 'complete' lottery entry forms. There is no charge to download and complete the Electronic Diversity Visa Entry Form. The Department of State notifies successful Diversity Visa applicants by letter, and NOT by **e-mail**."

The authentic diversity program is an annual lottery administered by the State Department in which 55,000 winners are randomly chosen by computer from more than nine million applicants in eligible countries.

Actual winners of the 2009 lottery were notified with letters postmarked between May and July last year.

The program's goal is to advance U.S. population diversity by encouraging applications from countries with traditionally low rates of immigration to this country. Among the nations that received the largest number of diversity visas this year were Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Ukraine.

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In the case of the **bogus** State Department **e-mail**, there are tip-offs that it is fraudulent, even though it looks deceptively real:

It uses the letterhead of the State Department's national visa center in Portsmouth, N.H. Since 2000, the actual program has been administered directly from the department's consular center in Williamsburg, Ky.

It has grammar, syntax and punctuation errors typically not found in an authentic State Department letter.

The **e-mail** originates from a blind Yahoo address.

It is signed by a woman who identifies herself as "secretary general" of the Kentucky Consular Center. While her name does not appear on the State Department's employee roster, it does turn up on several Web sites devoted to unmasking Internet scams.

Contact staff writer Michael Matza at 215-854-2541 or mmatza@phillynews.com.

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