Alert

To conduct business with DCA, please use the gray tool bar above to navigate to the section of the relevant board or unit. Should you have documentation you wish to provide to the board or unit, scan and email that documentation to the email address found on the board or unit's homepage. Please note that the DCA is experiencing high call volumes at this time, but you may contact the Division by telephone at 1-800-242-5846 and your call will be answered or returned as quickly as possible. **At this time, all visitors to DCA offices require an appointment.**

Press Release

For Immediate Release:
March 12, 2020

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Office of The Attorney General (http://www.nj.gov/oag/)
Gurbir S. Grewal, *Attorney General*

Division of Consumer Affairs (http://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/)
Paul R. Rodríguez, *Acting Director*

COVID-19 Update: Division of Consumer Affairs Coordinating Statewide Crackdown on Price Gouging During State of Emergency

AG Grewal, DCA Coordinating All-Hands-On-Deck Response with County and Local Partners

NEWARK – Attorney General Gurbir S. Grewal and the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs ("the Division") updated the public today about the ongoing enforcement of the State's price gouging and consumer-protection laws during the state of emergency declared by Governor Phil Murphy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Division is redirecting its investigative resources to keep up with the increased pace of price gouging complaints, dedicating approximately 55 investigators to inspecting retail establishments throughout the State. The surge comes as the Division has received approximately 270 complaints – including approximately 100 received over the last 24 hours - from consumers alleging price gouging or other unfair businesses practices in the sale of items related to the public's concern about COVID-19.

Attorney General Grewal and the Division are also coordinating with county and local partners. In a conference call with Consumer Affairs Local Assistance ("CALA") offices from around the state, Attorney General Grewal called on all state, county, and municipal consumer protection personnel to work quickly together to stop merchants from illegally profiting from public confusion and fears generated by the worldwide public health crisis.

Attorney General Grewal also asked consumer protection offices to redeploy available personnel to investigate price gouging and other complaints related to COVID-19.

"We have declared a zero-tolerance policy for price gouging and other unfair business practices that prey on consumers concerned by the COVID-19 pandemic and we must use every available resource to enforce the laws that protect New Jersey consumers," said Attorney General Grewal. "Today I called on New Jersey consumer protection offices at all levels to join forces to swiftly investigate and put a stop to any merchant seeking to take financial advantage of consumers trying to stay safe and protect themselves and their loved ones from the spread of this virus."

New Jersey's price gouging law prohibits excessive price increases during a declared state of emergency and for 30 days after its termination. With Executive Order No. 103, Governor Phil Murphy declared that New Jersey entered a State of Emergency, effective Monday, March 9, 2020.

The Division, which had already begun preemptively warning merchants about unfair business practices related to COVID-19 prior to the declaration, has moved quickly to enforce price gouging laws that went into effect on Monday.

"We are deploying dozens of investigators in the field every day to visit retail locations in response to complaints of price gouging and we're preparing to take action against a number of alleged violators," said Paul R. Rodríguez, Acting Director of the Division of Consumer Affairs. "Today, under the leadership of Attorney General Grewal, we took steps to maximize those efforts by enlisting the help of our CALA partners across the state in investigating alleged violations of our price gouging and other consumer protections laws."

Since Monday, the Division has conducted inspections at dozens of retail locations in response to allegations of price gouging, many of which were the subject of numerous complaints.

The Division also joined the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office in an enforcement matter relating to the alleged sale of a dangerous "spray sanitizer" at a 7-Eleven in River Vale.

On Tuesday March 10, Bergen County prosecutors charged store owner Manisha Bharade with endangering the welfare of a child and deceptive business practices for allegedly mixing, bottling, and selling a bootleg "spray sanitizer" that caused chemical burns to four juvenile boys. In connection with that incident, the Division opened an investigation into the store's practices regarding the sale and promotion of health and sanitation products offered by the store since the emergence of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Consumers are urged to beware of in-store or online advertisements for products that claim to cure or prevent COVID-19 or other offers and solicitations related to the disease.

Excessive price increases are illegal during a State of Emergency. An excessive price increase is any price that exceeds 10 percent of the price the product or service was sold during the normal course of business prior to the State of Emergency.

Price gouging violations are punishable by civil penalties of up to $10,000 for the first offense and $20,000 for the second and subsequent offenses. Violators may also be required to pay consumer restitution, attorney's fees, investigative fees, and injunctive relief. Each individual sale of merchandise is considered a separate and distinct violation.

If you believe price gouging is occurring, contact the Division of Consumer Affairs at (973) 504-6240. A special voicemail box has been set up to address COVID-19 related price gouging complaints and will be checked regularly, even outside of normal business hours. Please leave your name, contact information, nature of the complaint, and the name and location of the business. Consumers should note the price of a good or service being sold, as well as the price prior to the declared State of Emergency, if known.

Consumers are also encouraged to file complaints online by visiting the Division's website (https://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/).

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