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Locksmith Scheme Targets Midlands

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Columbia, SC (WLTX) - You think you're getting service from a Midlands business, but we found out that what looks like neighborhood businesses, are in fact out-of-state con artists. And they're using an elaborate scheme hoping to take you for a ride.

"Anybody can learn how to unlock a car. They can buy the tools," says Frank Curtis. But that's not the only thing that worries him. Curtis says he and other locksmiths have seen their business slow down dramatically. And now he thinks he knows why.

"I went on the Internet the other day and I found a locksmith company that turned my name around from Locksmith 24 Hour to 24 Hour Locksmith and was using my address," says Curtis.

While we were interviewing Curtis he had his friend Robert Currier call the number listed under Locksmith 24 Hour. The woman who answered the phone said they were a mobile service.

Then we had Currier call what he thought was another local locksmith. "Did I just speak with you,"

says Currier. The woman replied, "you might have if you're in Columbia, South Carolina, it's me again."

We learned that all the 791 exchanges under locksmith's in area code 803 lead back to the same woman.

News 19 found numerous www.yellowpages.com listings for locksmiths with "local" numbers but addresses for restaurants and other businesses in the area.

In fact, AAA Emergency Locksmith is listed as 1649 Main Street in Columbia. But that address belongs to Hennessey's Restaurant.

024 Hour Affordable Locksmith is listed as 4505 Devine Street in Columbia. The address is actually Applebee's Restaurant.

1A Access A247 Locksmith is listed as 3900 Main Street. We went by the location and found BiLo's Supermarket instead.

And even Locksmith Columbia 24-7 which is listed as 3405 Forest Drive is in fact, Pasta Fresco Restaurant. Owner Lauren Goodale was surprised to learn her business address was being used by con artists.

"Well, I'm a little shocked. We have nothing to do with being a locksmith. We obviously make pasta all day. But It makes me wonder as a business owner too, what kind of scam is this," says Goodale.

Meanwhile Curtis says the con artists are stealing from local businesses. "When you got 17, 18 bogus

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locksmiths than the legitimate locksmiths are sitting over here wondering why we're not getting any calls,"says Curtis.

According to the person who answered what seemed to be local numbers all went to a Nashville, Tennessee call center. She also told News 19 that she didn't know what the physical address was for her location. We asked her why and she replied that she just started working there.

But we know that all six calls that we made from what looks like different local numbers went to her. Meanwhile Curtis worries that he's not the only one being ripped off.

"If they tear something up on your car, than you'll have to go pay somebody else to fix it,"says Curtis.

The Better Business Bureau says this scheme is nationwide. It says many of these so-called locksmiths don't have local business licenses and charge much more than what is quoted over the phone.

Consumer Affairs says don't wait until you need a locksmith. Research and find a local and reputable locksmith ahead of time just in case you need their services one day.

Consumer experts say you should also ask to see a business license and be suspicious of locksmiths who show up in unmarked vehicles.

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