Pinellas County Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller, Division of Inspector General (Pinellas County IG), received its 2nd Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation (CFA) on February 24, 2016 to retain its state level reaccreditation. The Pinellas County IG became the first local government agency in the nation and first Florida Clerk of the Court and Comptroller’s office to be awarded the status as an Accredited Office of Inspector General by the CFA on February 3, 2010 and achieved their first reaccreditation on February 21, 2013.

The examination is part of a voluntary process to gain reaccreditation, which is a highly prized recognition for Offices of Inspector General’s professional excellence. The assessment team is composed of investigators from other Florida Offices of Inspector General. The CFA reaccreditation process consists of assessing the IG agency on 44 standards. In order to earn reaccreditation by the CFA, the Pinellas County IG must comply with 42 of these standards, those which are applicable to areas of responsibility and jurisdiction. The assessors will review written materials, interview individuals, visit offices and other places where compliance can be witnessed.

A team of CFA assessors arrived on Tuesday, December 2, 2015 to examine all aspects of the Pinellas County IG’s Investigations Section, including policies, procedures, management, operations and support services. The assessors consisted of the CFA Team Leader, Mr. Robert Brongel, Captain, Retired, Florida Department of Financial Services, Division of Insurance Fraud, and Mr. Bill Harvey, Special Projects Manager, Florida Department of Revenue, Office of Inspector General.

The CFA Assessment Team completed their review of the agency and prepared a formal report to the full Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation, Inc. acknowledging full compliance of all applicable standards. The CFA Commissioners voted unanimously to award the Pinellas County IG its 2nd reaccreditation during the Panel Review and full Commission meetings held on February 24, 2016. Reaccreditation occurs every three years.
Welcome to the IG Team:

Jason Stanley, Inspector General Auditor II

Promotions to Celebrate:

Ava Jurek, Inspector General Manager

Retirements Celebrated:

Ron Peters, Inspector General Manager
Kenneth Green, Inspector General Manager
Scott Stees, Senior Inspector General Auditor

Florida ranks first in fraud-related complaints filed with the FTC

Florida ranked first in the nation in the number of fraud-related and other consumer complaints filed with the Federal Trade Commission last year, with 306,133 complaints, amounting to 1,510 per 100,000 people.

The top category for Florida was debt collection, followed by telephone and mobile services, impostor scams, banks and lenders; prizes, sweepstakes and lotteries; auto-related complaints, shop-at-home and catalog sales, television and electronic media; credit bureaus and credit cards.

The state ranked third in the number of identity theft complaints filed with the FTC, at 44,063, or 217 per 100,000 people.

Among metropolitan areas, Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach ranked third in identity theft complaints, with 17,832, or 300 per 100,000 people.

The FTC received more than 3 million complaints in 2015. That’s up from 2.5 million in 2014.

The Craigslist ad features photos of a “truly magnificent” penthouse with wide windows overlooking the sparkling azure waters of Clearwater Beach.

With four bedrooms and 4.5 bathrooms, the 5,283-square-foot Sandpearl home is furnished and includes a wine cellar, granite countertops and a beachside cabana.

It could be yours for just $200 a night.

For tourists, it’s a slice of Florida paradise. For Clearwater police Detective Rob Lazzaro, the low price is the first indication that it’s a scam.

Lazzaro has received reports on more than 20 vacation rental schemes since late December. The Pinellas Sheriff’s Office has been investigating more than 12 cases since January, and detectives expect more cases to trickle in during spring break and summer.

“We’re not through. We’re definitely not through,” said Lazzaro this week. “During this next month is when all of the people are going to show up to their so-called rentals and figure out that they’ve been scammed.”

Here’s how it works: Someone scrapes the description and photos of a legitimate condo or home listing from Realtor websites like Zillow and then pastes all of the details into a new ad on websites like Craigslist, VRBO.com and Homeaway.com. An unsuspecting tourist clicks on the ad and emails the poster, who directs them to send a deposit. Victims send money via PayPal. Sometimes, they’re also instructed to mail a money order to a local Pinellas address that is then forwarded to another location, either out of state or overseas.

Others have legitimate bank accounts. Lazzaro heard of one case where someone in Cambodia incorporated a fake business through Delaware and opened a Bank of America business account.

“Whatever they can get away with, they try it,” said Sheriff’s Office Cpl. Robert Somers, who works in the economic crimes unit.

Some victims decide to do more research after sending their deposit and realize their vacation rental is a sham. Others don’t find out until they arrive at the gated properties and talk to staff.

And the money, once it has been sent, is gone.

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Lazzaro, of the economic crimes unit, has seen cases that mostly involve condos, including units in the Sandpearl Residences and the Grande on Sand Key, but has also found fraudulent ads for homes in Island Estates and north Clearwater Beach. Somers has seen mostly waterfront homes, some of them in Madeira Beach and Indian Rocks Beach, and also receives reports of vacant properties advertised online as monthly rentals.

Making arrests in these cases presents challenges, detectives say, since the networks of people operating the scams span across states and countries.

Last year, Lazzaro spoke to the Jenks Police Department in Oklahoma about a man who was accused of collecting money from several victims on behalf of a woman he had met online. One of the victims, who was from Canada, had wired a $2,253 deposit to him for a Clearwater property, police records show. After finding the legitimate rental ad, she called the property owner, who told her he didn’t advertise on Craigslist. He called Clearwater police.

The Sheriff’s Office recently forwarded one case involving a local person to prosecutors. They did not release more details because it remains an open investigation.

Most of the listings Lazzaro, the Clearwater detective, sees are on Craigslist, where ads are free and posters can remain anonymous. Lazzaro said he flags fraudulent ads on the website all the time, but if the ad looks legitimate enough, Craigslist might keep it. If the site decides to delete it, the poster can just create another ad.

A few months ago, Lazzaro posted on the vacation rentals section to warn Clearwater visitors about the schemes lurking online.

but Craigslist, explaining he wasn’t advertising a property, deleted it.

“I was trying to prepare for this spring break,” he said.