Where do you turn if you're in the market for a new place to live? A lot of people go online to find affordable rental properties. But before beginning your search, the Better Business Bureau of Minnesota and North Dakota (BBB) is warning people that there are many unscrupulous individuals using Craigslist and other websites – posing as landlords or rental agents – to scam you or steal your personal and financial information.

"The number of rental property scams online continues to grow," says Dana Badgerow, President and CEO of the BBB. "The names of the fictitious "property owners" may change, but the methods are always the same: attractive-looking properties are offered at low or unbelievable prices; consumers wire money for security deposits or the first month's rent and then quickly discover they've been defrauded."

Ads like these are not limited to Craigslist, and the online thieves behind them – many of whom are based overseas – are out to swipe your money and your identity.

The BBB provides the following tips for avoiding online rental property scams:

- Be leery of deals that sound too good to be true. Scammers will often list a rental at a very low price to lure in victims. Do some shopping around to find out how comparable listings are priced. If the rental comes in suspiciously low, walk away.

- Never wire money at the request of any prospective "landlord" via Western Union, Money Gram or any other wire service.

- Never send a scan of your passport or any other ID. Online thieves will use your identity to scam others. Ask to see the landlord's ID - record all the information you can from it.

- Do an Internet search of the person's name you're supposedly dealing with. You could add the words "fraud" or "scam" at the end of your search terms.

- If the ad or posting is full of spelling errors and grammatical errors, be aware there's a good chance you're dealing with an overseas scammer.

- Always ask to inspect the property – inside and out. In many rental scams, the "landlords" prefer to communicate via email, claiming to be out of the country and unable to show the rental property. This is usually a huge red flag.

- Consider using a real estate agent or a rental agency to find the property that's right for you. Check them out first at www.bbb.org.

The mission of the Better Business Bureau is to be the leader in building marketplace trust by promoting, through self-regulation, the highest standards of business ethics and conduct, and to instill confidence in responsible businesses through programs of education and action that inform, assist and protect the general public. Our hours of operation are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Contact the BBB at www.bbb.org or 651-699-1111, toll-free at 1-800-646-6222.