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HSI partners with Pfizer, 3M, Citi, Alibaba, Amazon, Merck to protect consumers against COVID-19 fraud

WASHINGTON – Industry experts from Pfizer, 3M, Citi, Alibaba, Amazon and Merck have joined forces with Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) National Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center (IPR Center) criminal investigators in an unprecedented public-private partnership to combat fraud and other illegal activity surrounding COVID-19.

“Scammers and other criminals are exploiting this time of anxiety and uncertainty to take advantage of consumers’ fears, and HSI has made it a top priority to investigate anyone attempting to use the COVID-19 pandemic to defraud other people,” said HSI Acting Executive Associate Director Alysa D. Erichs. “A robust partnership with the private sector is an absolute requirement to effectively disrupt and dismantle COVID-19 criminal networks and strengthen global supply-chain security.”

Since the start of the pandemic, HSI and other law enforcement agencies have seen a significant increase in criminals attempting to capitalize and profit from the fear and anxiety surrounding the virus, including the sale of counterfeit pharmaceuticals and medical equipment and illicit online sales and trade importation violations of products claiming to be treatment options.

“Pfizer is committed to delivering for the world breakthroughs that change patients’ lives,” said Albert Bourla, CEO and chairman, Pfizer Inc., “We are dedicated to protecting patients and applaud the National Intellectual Property Rights Center’s efforts to address harmful and misleading offers for counterfeit and substandard medicines or from fraudulent scams that put patient’s and first responders health and safety at risk.”

“At 3M, we play a unique and critical role in pandemic preparedness and response. As a result, we are attacking the pandemic from all angles, which includes mobilizing all our resources and rapidly increasing output of critical supplies to healthcare workers and first responders. These efforts also include combating fraud and protecting the public against those who seek to exploit the pandemic using 3M’s name connected with price gouging and counterfeiting. We are partnering with national and international law enforcement, tech companies and online retailers to prevent fraud before it starts and stop it where it is happening,” said Mike Roman, 3M chairman and chief executive officer.

“Citi is committed to playing an important role in protecting our clients and the financial system from illicit activity,” said Michael Corbat, Citi’s CEO. “Unfortunately, the need to combat this type

of activity only increases in a crisis like this so we are appreciative of this collaborative effort organized by the IPR Center and determined to continue to do our part.”

“Consumer health and safety is Alibaba's top priority. We will continue to enforce a zero-tolerance policy against those engaged in illicit activity, especially with respect to products and services related to COVID-19,” said Michael Evans, president of Alibaba Group. “We are proud to be part of this important collaboration and value our long-standing partnership with the Department of Homeland Security.”

“Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, Amazon has proactively stopped more than 6.5 million products with inaccurate claims, removed over 1 million offers for suspected price gouging, suspended more than 10,000 selling accounts for suspected price gouging and referred the most egregious offenders to federal and state law enforcement across the country. Amazon welcomes HSI’s partnership in holding counterfeiters and bad actors accountable, and we look forward to building on our long-standing relationship to protect customers and ensure a trusted shopping experience,” said Dharmesh Mehta, Amazon vice president, customer trust and partner support.

“Merck is committed to patient safety and protecting the public from the dangers of counterfeit medicines. We appreciate this collaboration and we will continue to partner with law enforcement and health care officials worldwide to combat the dangers posed by criminals trafficking in illicit medicines,” said David Resch, vice president and chief security officer, Merck & Co., Inc.

In April, HSI launched Operation Stolen Promise to prevent and investigate illegal criminal activity surrounding the pandemic, strengthen global supply-chain security and protect the American public. Operation Stolen Promise combines HSI’s expertise in global trade, financial fraud, international operations and cyber-crime to investigate financial fraud schemes, the importation of prohibited pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, websites defrauding consumers, and any other illicit criminal activities associated with the virus that compromises legitimate trade or financial systems, or endangers the public.

HSI, a component of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security, is working closely with private sector and U.S. government partners to facilitate a speedy, whole-of-government response to combat Coronavirus Disease 2019 fraud and illicit criminal activity.

As of May 4, HSI special agents have opened over 315 investigations nationwide; seized over \$3.2 million dollars in illicit proceeds; made 11 arrests; executed 21 search warrants; analyzed over 19,000 COVID-19 domain names; and worked alongside U.S. Customs and Border Protection to seize 494 shipments of mislabeled, fraudulent, unauthorized or prohibited COVID-19 test kits, treatment kits, homeopathic remedies, purported anti-viral products and personal protective equipment (PPE).

The IPR Center, which stands at the forefront of the United States government’s response to combatting global intellectual property theft and enforcing international trade laws, is working with its 25 federal and industry partners to identify, interdict, and investigate individuals, companies, and criminal organizations engaging in the illegal importation of COVID-19 related products.

To report suspected illicit criminal activity or fraudulent schemes related to the COVID-19 pandemic, email Covid19Fraud@dhs.gov.

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