

# Study done by County

management; or the scammer is impersonating the leaser of a legal rental. In either event, travelers believe they are booking an accommodation, but they are not, and may not discover they have been duped until they arrive at the address they have been given expecting to check in. There have been cases where scammers copy and paste pictures of a home for sale from the MLS and create a fictitious vacation rental ad that travelers respond to. There have been cases where legitimate vacation rental units have their site hacked and the scammer impersonates them to collect payment. Some homes have been used over and over again in scams against their will, to the point where the homeowner has had to post a sign on the exterior alerting travelers their home is not the vacation rental they think they have booked.

In cases such as these, the first step is to report it to the Monroe County Sheriff's office, or in Key West, the Key West Police Department. After investigation, the case may be turned over to the State Attorney's Office. The State Attorney's office has provided the TDC with tips they previously compiled for spotting a vacation rental scam. In our Section II: Recommendations and Next Steps, we will discuss how we may utilize these tips, and others we have gathered, to educate visitors and be proactive in stopping scams before they can occur.

Another agency that should be notified in the event a vacation rental scam occurs is the U.S. Federal Trade Commission or FTC. Information on how to contact FTC is included later in this report from our website posting on vacation rental scams.

## ***Vessel Vacation Rentals***

A perusal of accommodation rental sites like Expedia.com, VRBO.com and Airbnb.com will reveal several overnight vacation rentals that are on boats. Our initial research into the legality of overnight accommodations on vessels found this to be a complicated area that warrants further investigation. Municipal jurisdiction generally ends at land leading to the question of which agency may oversee such activity as its occurring on the water. Rules differ from vessels that stay at dock or go out to sea. We found the first step would be to determine with the marina itself if a transient rental is permitted in the lease agreement for the boat slip. For example, in the City of Key West at Garrison Bight Marina steps have been taken to clarify on lease agreements that this type of sublease is not permitted. The Marina may intercede to stop such practices where not permitted as a violation of the slip lease. We will continue to investigate rules and regulations for this practice.

## ***Online Vacation Rental Practices***

One of the primary mechanisms for illegal vacation rental units to advertise is through online rental sites; though in some cases magazine ads have also be utilized. This does not mean that every unit on popular online sites like VRBO.com, HomeAway.com, Airbnb.com is illegal. Rather that, they may utilize this method just as legal units do and may therefore be difficult to initially spot. As discussed later in the report in our review of our discussions with Code Enforcement/Compliance officers, some sites have been worse than others for ratio of illegal to legal units. Craigslist.com has been found to have the highest ratio of illegal units and most often been the source of vacation rental scams.