



OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY
COUNTY OF TULARE

Tim Ward, *District Attorney*

PRESS RELEASE

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**TCDA BUREAU OF INVESTIGATIONS RESPONDS TO PRICE
GOUGING COMPLAINTS, CONTACTS SELLERS**

Since the onset of the COVID-19 virus pandemic, the TCDA Bureau of Investigations has received nearly 50 calls from residents reporting price gouging. Price gouging is when a seller tries to take an unfair advantage of consumers during an emergency or disaster by greatly increasing prices (above 10% prior to an emergency declaration) for essential consumer goods and services. Violations of California's price gouging statute are subject to criminal prosecution that can result in one-year imprisonment in county jail and/or a fine of up to \$10,000.

It is important to note, however, that it is not price gouging if the seller can prove the increase in price is directly attributed to a rise in the cost of labor or materials needed.

The Bureau of Investigations formed a task force to field and log consumer complaints, respond to businesses accused of price gouging, and perform undercover operations to determine if businesses had conformed to the law once warned by a criminal investigator.

Protecting consumers is a high priority any time, but particularly in a time of crisis when our family, friends, and neighbors are struggling to purchase necessary items to survive while they shelter at home. These urgent circumstances made going from store to store, in person, crucial to preventing any taking advantage of Tulare County residents. Investigators checked on specific items callers complained about and issued warnings to store personnel. Other investigators returned to stores in violation in an undercover capacity to check to see if the stores were in compliance.

To date, many Tulare County retailers are doing their best to provide for the community. A majority of instances have been misunderstandings. A gas station, for example, that only sold individual water bottles (at the price of a dollar), then decided to sell water by the case (24 bottles) for \$24.00. Some callers went to a retailer to purchase their usual brand of product only to find it sold out and the

other brands were far more expensive (for example, organic milk may cost more than non-organic milk). Investigators also found that consumers were confusing a larger size price with the price for a smaller size. Consumers also alleged instances of non-essential items being marked up, like spices, and that the price of an item at an independent mini-mart was more expensive than at a retailer such as Walmart.

The Bureau of Investigations will continue to investigate allegations of price gouging as we move through these unprecedented times. “Because we are the “Bread Basket of America” we must never take for granted where our food comes from and markets, especially those in rural areas, should never take for granted the customers who work hard to purchase that gallon of milk,” said District Attorney Tim Ward. “Just like those signs remind us about our jobs depending on Ag, this is certainly a time when we depend on each other to do the right thing.”

Residents are encouraged to continue to report possible price gouging to the TCDA Bureau of Investigations at 559-636-5410.

*Media inquiries can be directed to the Office of the District Attorney, County of Tulare
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