

Beware Of Home Improvement and Clean-Up Scams

A rash of severe weather can bring with it more than downed tree limbs, strewn garbage cans and clogged rain gutters. These storms also bring with them a rash of folks who seem to appear from nowhere, offering to clean up your storm damage, repair or waterproof your roof, or trim your trees.

Look out for “traveling handymen” pitches - The sales pitch may come in the form of “we have a little material left-over from a job down the street,” and the price quoted usually sounds like a good deal. The materials used, however, generally range from low to no quality. For example, driveway sealants may consist of nothing more than oil or paint which never dry or may simply wash away in the first rain. If the traveler is offering a service such as tree trimming, payment is often requested up front for work to be done the next day. In these situations, the traveler is usually never seen again.

Get it in writing - Travelers succeed in separating consumers from their money by giving them little time to consider the offer. They seldom offer written contracts. If one is requested, the traveler may produce a form contract or write one up by hand. The contact information listed, however, is usually bogus and the terms of the contract are vague. Guarantees are worthless since these folks are not hanging around to hear your complaint. Even worse, travelers have also been known to engage in home burglary while the repair scam is in progress.

Tips to remember - If your doorbell rings and you are offered a great deal on home-improvement or handyman services remember the following:

- In Howard County, door-to-door salespeople are required to have an ID card issued by the Office of Consumer Protection. If the salesperson doesn't have a card, don't do business with him/her and report the solicitation to the Office of Consumer Protection at (410-313-6420).
- Paving, painting, and other home improvement work requires a Maryland Home Improvement Contractor's license. If the contractor gives you a license number, call the Maryland Home Improvement Commission at 410-230-6309 to verify its validity.
- In Maryland, home improvement contractors may not require you to pay more than one-third of the contract price up front. Do not be persuaded by hard luck stories to pay more than a third of the price in advance of the work being completed.
- While all door-to-door solicitors are required to give you a 3-day right to cancel your contract in writing, remember that you won't be able to exercise that right if you (or local or state authorities) can't find the contractor. Once you pay your money, it may be impossible to get it back.
- If you ever feel threatened or intimidated, call 911 immediately.

To obtain this factsheet in an alternative format, please contact the Office of Consumer Protection at 410-313-6420(voice/relay) or email us at consumer@howardcountymd.gov.