



NEED TO HIRE A HOME IMPROVEMENT PROFESSIONAL?

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

FOR MOST TEXANS, A HOME ISN'T JUST A place to live and raise a family – it's their most valuable financial asset. Adding improvements, repairing damage, and keeping up with routine maintenance are all part of a smart homeowner's plan to protect and increase the value of an important asset.

Unfortunately, scam artists posing as home repair contractors know residents will part with hard-earned money to improve their homes. So to protect their pocketbooks, homeowners should know how to protect themselves and avoid falling victim to these scams.

Damaged homes – whether by storms or passage of time – can be easily noticed by scam artists posing as contractors and marketing their services door-to-door. Texans should be cautious when unsolicited salespeople come knocking on their doors. Businesses that perform specialized home repairs seldom walk neighborhoods looking for work. Anytime a contractor appears unsolicited and relies on high-pressure tactics to secure new business, homeowners should say no thanks. Legitimate contractors know that customers need time to think about significant decisions – and maybe even ask a few questions. Trustworthy contractors will always welcome customers' questions.

In some cases, con artists try to talk

homeowners into unnecessary repairs by offering special deals with purportedly "surplus" materials. Common ploys involve offers to seal roofs, replace lost roof shingles or pour new driveways. Although these scammers often appear professional and may sound very knowledgeable and friendly, homeowners should never impulsively purchase home repair or construction services that they were not already planning.

Equally important, Texans should only use licensed or bonded contractors or builders. The Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR) is the state's occupational regulatory agency that oversees more than 20 types of occupations and industries. TDLR issues licenses, conducts inspections, investigates complaints, assesses penalties, sets rules and standards, and holds hearings. Homeowners can visit www.license.state.tx.us to verify a contractor's licensing credentials and inquire about complaints.

Homeowners should avoid contractors who do not have established physical addresses – and instead only offer cell phone numbers. A physical address could help customers locate the contractor if problems arise with the repairs. Texans who buy from a fly-by-night contractor may never see him or her again.

Homeowners should also verify any

claims contractors make about energy savings or increased security, home value, or other added advantages to improvements they are buying.

Once a contractor has been chosen to perform repair work, Texans should read the legally-binding contract carefully before signing it. Customers should not sign any contracts that have blanks – those blanks could later be filled in with unfavorable terms.

As with any home repair work, homeowners may be asked to pay a portion of the repair costs as a down-payment. That is a generally accepted practice, but homeowners should NEVER pay the entire repair cost in advance.

For example, the Attorney General's Office prosecuted a pool contractor who was paid by homeowners across central and south Texas – but he failed to perform any meaningful work. The contractor was sentenced to nine years in prison for defrauding a Caldwell County woman who paid him more than \$50,000 for a pool that was never installed.

Texans who are unable to resolve a dispute with their contractor should file a complaint with the Attorney General's Office online at www.texasattorneygeneral.gov or by calling toll-free at (800) 252-8011.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER



HOME IMPROVEMENT OR REPAIRS

When Texans turn to third-party contractors to help with home improvement or repairs, they should consider these tips:

- Be wary of contractors who solicit services door-to-door, especially those who are unfamiliar or from out of town;
- Deal only with licensed or bonded contractors or builders;
- Get the physical address of the contractor's business;
- Don't rush into signing a contract, and never pay up-front for promised work;
- Secure the terms of any warranty work in writing; and
- Ask for references, or rely on recommendations from friends or relatives who have had experience with honest home improvement professionals.

Texans who are unable to resolve a dispute with a home improvement professional may file a complaint with the Attorney General's Office online at www.texasattorneygeneral.gov or by calling (800) 252-8011.



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