



Consumer Protection

How to Protect Yourself: Contractors

Source: The Florida Attorney General's Office

Complaints against contracting companies run the gamut from firms that take consumers' money for services which are never provided to firms that advertise cheap services who then try to "up-sell" new systems or pricey repairs. Consider the following when hiring a contractor to perform a home repair or remodel:

Get multiple estimates.

Get at least three written, itemized estimates or bids on repairs or remodels. Have your insurance company evaluate any damage to your home before arranging repairs to ensure that the work will be covered under your policy.

Watch for red flags.

Be wary of anyone who approaches you unsolicited or says they can perform home repairs at a discount with leftover supplies from another job. Additionally, consider it a warning sign if a contractor uses high pressure sales tactics. A reputable contractor will recognize that you will need time to consider your options and needs. If you choose to finance the work done in your home, make sure you read and understand all of the loan documents before you sign them. Understand how much you will be required to pay up front, what your monthly payments will be and how much you will be required to pay over the life of the loan before signing.

Research the company thoroughly before signing a contract or providing a deposit.

When searching for a contractor, ask trusted friends and neighbors for references. You should check with the Better Business Bureau at www.bbb.org to determine what others are saying about the company. Additionally, you should contact the state Department of Business & Professional Regulation (DBPR) to determine whether the contractor has any complaints lodged against them at (850) 487-1395.

Verify the contractor is licensed and insured.

Verify that the contractor has a license from the Florida Department of Business & Professional Regulation for the type of work you wish to have performed at www.myfloridalicense.com. If the county has its own

licensure requirements, verify any county license with the applicable construction licensing board. Check for proof of insurance and verify with the insurer that their policy is current. Additionally, you should check to see if the contractor is bonded and verify with the bonding agency.

Read and understand the contract.

Read the entire contract, including the fine print, before signing and ensure that the contract includes the required “buyer’s right to cancel” (within 3 days) language. Never pay the full amount of a repair up front and hesitate before providing large deposits. Florida law requires a contractor to apply for a permit within 30 days and start work within 90 days if he collects more than 10 percent of the contract up front. Know what you will be expected to pay, how long the work is expected to take and what will happen should the costs or repair times exceed the estimates.

Ensure there are no liens placed on your home.

Homeowners may unknowingly have liens placed against their properties by suppliers or subcontractors who have not been paid by the contractor. If the contractor fails to pay them, the liens will remain on the title. Insist on releases of any liens that could be placed on the property from all subcontractors prior to making final payments. Do not sign a certificate of completion or make a final payment until you are satisfied with the work performed.

File a complaint.

If you wish to file a complaint against a contractor, you may contact the Department of Business & Professional Regulation online at www.myfloridalicense.com or by phone at (850) 487-1395. Additionally, you should file a complaint with the Attorney General’s Office online at www.myfloridalegal.com or by phone toll-free at 1-866-9-NO-SCAM.

You may also file a complaint with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which acts as the State's consumer complaint clearinghouse, at www.floridaconsumerhelp.com.

Florida Toll Free Numbers:

- Fraud Hotline 1-866-966-7226
- Lemon Law 1-800-321-5366