



*Disasters can occur anywhere, anytime. They can cause financial and emotional devastation. There is hope and help available to rebuild. But there are things to watch out for...  
AFTER THE DISASTER.*



### **Is That "Official" Really Official?**

Many representatives from various agencies will be out doing whatever they can to help the community get back to normal. Con artists may be out there, too. These con artists may be posing as building inspectors, repairmen, public utility employees, an insurance agent, or a broker collecting a processing fee for FEMA checks. Never let anyone into your home without first asking for identification and checking it out.

### **Who's Knocking At Your Door?**

Unscrupulous sellers may come knocking at your door trying to sell you all types of products and services. The sellers may use high pressure or scare tactics and may misrepresent the quality and value of their products. You may receive a bill greatly exceeding the normal rate.

#### ***To avoid being victimized by an unscrupulous seller, follow these tips:***

In Suffolk, door-to-door solicitors are required to obtain a permit. Ask to see their permit before allowing access. If they can't produce a valid permit, contact the Suffolk Police Department. If you are interested in the offer, get everything in writing, including price, warranty and all conditions. Tell the salesperson you will check it out and get back to him/her. Check out the company and comparison shop. Don't make large up-front payments and never pay in cash.

Federal and State Law give consumers the right to cancel most door-to-door sales over \$25 within three business days. The seller is required to give written notice of that right to consumers, and consumers must give their notice of cancellation in writing. Cancellation may not be made if the buyer has requested goods or services without delay because of an emergency or if the goods cannot be returned to the seller in substantially as good a condition as when received by the buyer.



### **Don't Get Nailed By Home Repair Fraud**

Consumers may discover their damaged homes and businesses may need extensive repairs or, in some cases, demolition.

Consumers need to carefully determine how to deal with the necessary repairs and the offers they receive to do the work.

Insurance and construction fraud are serious crimes that affect all Virginians. Insurance settlements and relief payouts from the federal government provide con artists with many opportunities to profit unfairly.

Itinerant contractors will flock to disaster sites, drawn by the demand for repairs and the availability of money. Consumers, anxious to make their homes livable again, may let their guard down and overlook the standard warning signs of a home repair scam. Using good judgment and taking the necessary precautions could save you money and frustration.

#### ***Watch out for:***

- Strangers arriving at your door offering to do repairs.
- Solicitors saying "We've just finished a job nearby and have material left over so we can do the job at a low price."
- Contractors with no physical address and only an answering service or pager.
- Contractors who refuse to give written estimates, contracts or references.
- High pressure sales tactics or someone who tries to rush you into a decision.
- Requirements of a large down payment or full payment before the job is completed.



***Before you sign on the dotted line, consider the following:***

- If repairing damage to property, always use a licensed contractor. In Virginia, all contractors must be licensed, bonded and carry insurance coverage for work costing over \$1,000.
- Make sure the contractor has the appropriate licenses and insurance for the job. To check State licenses, call the State Board for Contractors at (804) 367-8511. To find out if a contractor is licensed to do business in Virginia, call the Virginia Department of Professional and Occupational Regulations (DPOR), at (804) 367-3504. Report an unlicensed contractor using this telephone number. Keep in mind this regulation applies to Virginia contractors and to out-of-state contractors doing business in Virginia. You may also contact DPOR at their website of [www.dpor.virginia.gov](http://www.dpor.virginia.gov). An additional source for confirming information on a contractor's

business is the Virginia State Corporation Commission. Their number is (804) 371-9733.

- Ask to see a contractor's professional license. Ask for the contractor's business address, including all actual street addresses (not just a P.O. Box). Also ask to see the contractor's driver's license and write down his or her identifying information. In addition, make a note of any vehicle license plate information, telephone numbers displayed on the vehicle, etc.
- Get the full name of the contractor's business and the full name of the individual contractor. You can check the businesses' and the individual's names against local court websites to see if the contractor has been involved in litigation related to his or her business. Go to [www.courts.state.va.us](http://www.courts.state.va.us) and then follow directions on the court's website.
- Check complaint history.
- Request references and check them.
- Get written estimates from at least 3 companies.
- Make sure the contract is specific and includes a completion date with a penalty clause.
- If in doubt about any contract, ask for a copy and consult with your insurance agent, a lawyer or other resource. Beware of contractors who insist that you sign a contract immediately without giving you an opportunity to review the contract and check references. A good contractor is proud of his or her work and will be happy to give you time to review documents and check references.
- If the contract was signed in your home, make sure it includes a notice of your right to cancel within 3 days.
- Make certain the payment schedule reflects the work completed. Consider various financing options.
- Do not pay cash for work performed. Your check or money order will serve as a record of your payment. Do not give payment in full in advance of the repairs and avoid contractors who insist on such. Most contractors will ask for a deposit of funds in advance and request remaining payment upon satisfactory completion of work. A written contract should include a payment schedule specifying what payment amounts are due from the property owner and at what intervals.
- Never sign a blank contract and never provide contractors with a blank check for them to complete.
- There is virtually no reason a contractor will need your Social Security Number, "PIN" or bank account access numbers, etc. **DO NOT GIVE THIS INFORMATION.**
- Always require the contractor to obtain necessary permits and inspections.
- Never sign a certificate of completion before the job is done to your satisfaction.
- Once a contractor has given you an estimate, or once work is completed, beware if they insist on returning to your home. Ask that they set an appointment for such, inquire in advance the reason for the visit and meet the contractor with a friend or relative present as a witness. An unscrupulous contractor may seek to sell you further unneeded services or gain access to your home's valuables.
- If possible, remain on site when repairs are being done, or arrange for a trusted friend or family member to stay on the property.
- Keep your insurance agent advised of estimates, repairs, etc. Immediately report suspicious conduct to your insurance agent, the Suffolk Police Department Detective Bureau at 514-7947, and the Virginia Department of Professional and Occupational Regulations (DPOR), at (804) 367-3504.
- If you feel you have been the victim of insurance or construction fraud, you should contact the Suffolk Police Department Detective Bureau at 514-7947. Additionally, you may contact the Suffolk Commonwealth's Attorney's Office at 514-4365 if you should have any additional questions.



**Managing Credit After Disasters**

Many belongings may be temporarily or permanently lost. Jobs may also be lost and income reduced. Here are a few tips on how to manage credit in the wake of a disaster:

- If you are separated from your possessions, make sure you have all your credit cards. If any are missing, call the issuer immediately.
- If you are out of work temporarily and unable to make payments, call the issuer and try to work out a payment schedule.
- Use your credit cards with caution. Know the credit limit. Keep in mind that cash advances can be very costly.
- Watch out for credit card scams, promises to repair your credit, or other types of credit fraud.



### **Watch Out For Advance Fee Loan Scams**

The sales pitch sounds great – get a loan or credit card quickly regardless of a poor credit history or current financial situation. That may sound good, especially to victims of a disaster who need funds in a hurry. However, the reality is you won't receive the loan or the credit card and the money you paid for the up-front fees will be gone, too. Here are some tips to protect you:

- Be wary of loans that seem too easy to obtain.
- Watch out for ads for loans that list a 900 number.
- Be skeptical if you have to pay money before receiving a loan. If you need a loan, work with a local lender you know and trust.



### **Auto Repair: Don't Be Taken For A Ride**

If your car suffered water damage or any other mechanical or body damage:

- Have repairs made by a reputable repair shop.
- Check the shop's complaint history.
- Be sure to get detailed written estimates which show the cost of parts and labor separately.
- Get several estimates if major repairs are necessary.
- Compare warranties.

- Once you have chosen a shop, instruct the mechanic to call for authorization before making repairs not listed on the original repair order and ask for the old parts.
- Remember, the Virginia Auto Repair Facilities Act protects consumers by prohibiting the bill to exceed the written estimate by more than ten percent (10%) unless additional work is authorized.



### **Use Your Heart and Your Head When Making Charitable Contributions**

When disaster strikes, many charities and non-profit organizations spring into action collecting food, water, clothing and money to assist victims. Unfortunately, this time of need is also a time of prey for con artists.

If you wish to donate money to help victims, and ensure your money helps people truly in need, remember these tips:

- Give money to organizations you know. Don't fall for copy-cat names.
- Ask for written information about the organization and check it out.
- Don't fall for high pressure tactics, emotional appeals, or requests for immediate contributions.
- Ask for information about how the money is used. Most of your donation could be used to pay professional fund-raisers.
- If you're going to contribute, don't use cash.
- Make sure the charity is registered with the State Office of Consumer Affairs (800) 552-9963.

### **A Message From Your Commonwealth's Attorney** **C. Phillips "Phil" Ferguson**



"Knowing that others need help following the damage caused by a natural disaster often brings out the best in people. Sometimes it brings out the worst – con artists trying to take advantage of the situation. They may lure consumers into giving up their money for phony charities or for non-existent loans or repairs. We want you, your relatives and neighbors to be able to tell the difference between legitimate help and scams.

Together, we can help keep our community a safe, friendly and caring place to live, work and play before – *and after* -- the disaster."