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NY OFFICIALS ANNOUNCE RESULTS OF COORDINATED ENFORCEMENT TARGETING UNLICENSED HOME IMPROVEMENT CONTRACTORS

Regional Counties Seize More Than 70 Vehicles Owned by Unlicensed Home Improvement Contractors, Issue Fines and Criminal Summonses in July Sting; Officials Cite High Volume of Complaints and Offer Tips for Homeowners

Home improvement contractors who operate illegally without a license and often fail to meet industry standards can cause damage to homeowners' property and wallets. To step up enforcement efforts and better protect homeowners, New York regional consumer affairs and law enforcement agencies today announced the results of a coordinated, multi-county enforcement initiative targeting unlicensed home improvement contractors operating in the five boroughs and beyond. The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester counties collectively reported issuing more than 200 violations, 200 criminal summonses or arrests, and seizing more than 70 vehicles owned by unlicensed home improvement contractors during the month of July. Officials also announced efforts to expand education for homeowners and more strategic initiatives. DCA Commissioner Jonathan Mintz was joined by Nassau County District Attorney Kathleen Rice, Nassau County Office of Consumer Affairs Commissioner Roger Bogsted, Suffolk County District Attorney Thomas J. Spota, and representatives from the Westchester County Department of Consumer Protection at DCA offices in lower Manhattan for the announcement.

"By coordinating partners across the region, this enforcement sweep against illegal unlicensed contractors sends an unmistakable message of zero tolerance. Simply put: if you're a home improvement contractor, you must be licensed and do right by homeowners or face large fines, vehicle seizures, and more," said Commissioner Mintz.

During July, the **New York City Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA)** conducted undercover and routine inspections throughout the five boroughs resulting in the seizure of 51 vehicles owned by unlicensed home improvement contractors, as well as nearly 100 additional violations issued based upon consumer complaints and monitoring advertisements. Fielding more than 1,100 consumer complaints, DCA has secured approximately \$900,000 in restitution for homeowners over the past year, implemented more stringent compliance agreements including a *Homeowner Bill of Rights*, and increased public education with on-site community licensing forums, training for industry professionals, and bi-lingual tip cards for homeowners. As part of a targeted initiative, DCA has also secured approximately \$200,000 in total fines over the last three months from settlements stemming from deceptive home improvement advertising touting unlicensed contractors and illegal loan offers. Currently there are more than 10,800 home improvement contractors licensed to work in New York City – a record number up approximately 70% from four years ago.

"In Nassau County, we will not tolerate rip-off contractors who prey on our communities financially and often put innocent families in serious physical danger,"

said Nassau County District Attorney Kathleen Rice. "My administration will continue to work with Consumer Affairs to wipe out the dishonest businesses in our communities and provide valuable information to families renovating or building their homes."

"The results of this investigation should serve to alert homeowners," Nassau County Consumer Affairs Commissioner Roger Bogsted said. "If you're shopping for a home improvement contractor in the state of New York, check with Consumer Affairs and only do business with licensed contractors that have a solid reputation. We have zero tolerance for unscrupulous contractors defrauding home owners and those contractors that skirt the law will receive prompt appropriate penalties."

During July, **Nassau County** officials from the District Attorney's Office and Office of Consumer Affairs conducted undercover and field inspections resulting in the seizure of 15 vehicles owned by unlicensed home improvement contractors, as well as more than 100 additional violations. Efforts also included use of a sting house where 29 individuals were arrested for fraud and operating without a license. Over the past year, Nassau has assisted consumers with refunds of more than \$525,000, with an estimated \$125,000 for the month of July alone.

"The fact that we nabbed over 150 unlicensed home improvement and appliance repair contractors in just one month shows consumers that they must do their homework – get personal references and check to see that the contractor has a valid license – before they hire anyone to work on their home," said Thomas J. Spota, Suffolk County District Attorney.

During July, the **Suffolk County** District Attorney's Office coordinated a multi-pronged enforcement strategy with the help of the Suffolk County Office of Consumer Affairs and the Suffolk County Police Department. The police checked over 1,000 contractors' licenses and issued 150 criminal summonses to unlicensed contractors. In addition, an undercover sting house operation caught 35 illegal and unlicensed contractors – including numbers one and two on Consumer Affairs "Worst Offender" list – and resulted in the seizure of six of the offenders' vehicles.

"Westchester County Executive Andy Spano's administration has had a long record of cracking down on illegal home improvement contractors. During this latest regional effort, Westchester County Consumer Protection inspectors took a two-prong approach in enforcing the county's home improvement law, including hundreds of field inspections and monitoring local ads," said John P. Gaccione, Deputy Director, Westchester County Department of Consumer Protection.

During July, **Westchester County** Department of Consumer Protection deployed three teams of field inspectors conducting more than 460 inspections of home improvement contractors and finding 80 companies working without a license. Inspectors stopped at work sites, interviewed homeowners and participated with local police departments in vehicle and traffic stops. The department also monitored local newspaper ads checking for unlicensed activity, which resulted in an additional 16 violations.

"Sadly, too many contractors carry a bag of tricks instead of a tool box, and the proof can be found in the successful stings carried out by the New York City, Westchester and Nassau county departments of Consumer Affairs, along with their law-enforcement partners," said Mindy A. Bockstein, Chairperson and Executive Director of the New York State Consumer Protection Board.

To file a complaint, check if a home improvement contractor is licensed, request free

consumer and business publications, or license application requirements, please contact the following consumer protection agencies:

New York City Department of Consumer Affairs (Dial 311 or www.nyc.gov/consumers)

Nassau County Office of Consumer Affairs (www.nassaucountyny.gov/agencies/oca)

Suffolk County Department of Consumer Affairs (www.co.suffolk.ny.us or 631-853-4600)

Westchester County Department of Consumer Protection
(www.westchester.gov/consumer)

New York State Consumer Protection Board (www.consumer.state.ny.us)

Homeowner Tips Are Attached