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UNLICENSED HOME IMPROVEMENT CONTRACTORS AND UNFINISHED, SHODDY WORK TOP LIST OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED AT DCA FOR 2004

DCA Secured \$650,000 in Restitution to Homeowners Over Past Six Months

The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) receives 5,000 contacts per month from New Yorkers who want to file a complaint, request information, and more. Last year, DCA was able to mediate complaints and secure more than \$1 million in restitution for New York City consumers. The DCA enforces City and State consumer protection and licensing laws. The following list highlights most common complaints filed with the DCA and provides some tips on how New York consumers can protect themselves. To file a complaint or for more information, consumers are urged to call the City's 24-hour hotline at 311 or go online to www.nyc.gov/consumers

HOME IMPROVEMENT CONTRACTORS

Home improvement contractors are DCA's number one complaint category, with approximately 900 complaints filed last year and more than 560 so far this year. There are approximately 8,000 licensed contractors in New York City (an increase of more than 30% since 2002) but many others are unlicensed, uninsured, and unreliable. If not careful, consumers can be taken for a ride very easily, whether it's having your home left in shambles or paying up-front for services not rendered by an unscrupulous contractor. DCA's Home Improvement Contractor Trust Fund is only available to provide up to \$15,000 in restitution to consumers who use a licensed contractor.

TIPS: Call 311 and check with DCA to see if a vendor is licensed and if they have a record of complaints. Go online to www.nyc.gov/consumers to check the DCA's instant HIC license check. Only use a licensed contractor. Check the contract carefully, especially for a cancellation notice. Only pay the vendor after the work is completed to the your satisfaction. Never pay cash.

DEBT COLLECTORS

The DCA received more than 500 complaints against debt collectors last year, and 285 so far this year. Any vendor collecting debts from New York City residents must be licensed by DCA. Complaints regarding debt collectors generally concern debts that the consumer says he or she does not owe or alleged harassment tactics by the debt collector, like calling in the middle of the night.

TIPS: Check to see if the debt collector has a license and if so, make sure the vendor is legitimate. Confirm all agreements to resolve a debt in writing. Don't ignore a debt collector because even a small debt could hurt your credit rating.

ELECTRONICS

Consumers can easily get scammed if they are not careful when looking for a bargain on electronics. Last year the DCA received more than 450 complaints about shady electronics sales. Most common complaints include purchasing damaged or defective goods that were labeled as new. Consumers also can get lured into stores with bait and switch schemes that advertise great deals that aren't available when you get

there. Shoppers looking for good deals end up paying, in some cases, up to \$1,000 or more for unwanted merchandise that were described as necessary items. Meanwhile, these "items" often are the battery or pieces that already came with the product.

TIPS: Always shop at licensed electronics stores - they are required to post their DCA license conspicuously. Request an itemized receipt and examine it closely for hidden charges. Look for the store's refund policy, which should be posted.

FURNITURE STORES

DCA does not license furniture stores, but it remains one of the agency's top complaint categories. Last year DCA received more than 350 complaints about furniture. Most consumers complain about defective or damaged merchandise or items that never get delivered. For example, one consumer was delivered the wrong item, refused the delivery and was refused a refund. Other complaints include billing disputes and the sale of used mattresses as new.

TIPS: Check on complaint history of business before purchasing merchandise. Ask for an exact delivery date and insist it be written on the receipt. If not posted, ask for the store's refund policy in writing and examine your receipt closely.

EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES

The DCA has received more than 100 complaints so far this year and is stepping up enforcement against businesses that are operating unlicensed. Employment agencies can prey on those who need work the most or who want to be 'stars.' Whether its businesses that specialize in placing new immigrants in jobs, or a modeling agency promising big roles and work, consumers need to be careful.

TIPS: Make sure the agency placing you in jobs is licensed by the DCA. Depending on the category of jobs being placed, upfront fees may be illegal and if not, limits apply. Call 311 to request a copy of the DCA's "What You Need to Know About Employment Agencies" guide.