

Hiring a contractor? Best have a contract

ANYONE WITH questions about or knowledge of a potential home improvement scam should contact the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division, at 1-800-368-8808; the Eastern Panhandle Consumer Protection Office, at 304-267-0239; or visit wva-go.gov.

BY HOLLIE GREGORY
For The Dominion Post

Home owners need to be diligent when seeking and hiring contractors in order to prevent fraud.

According to a news release from Attorney General Patrick Morrisey's office, some of the most common complaints received are related to a lack of home improvement licensing and failure to complete work.

National statistics say that 59 percent of home owners plan home improvement projects this year, so how can these people be proactive against untrustworthy contractors potentially

committing fraud against them?

"Signing a contract is the best safeguard to protect yourself from getting ripped off," Morrisey said. "It sets guidelines and expectations for the work so no one is treated unfairly."

West Virginia state law requires a written contract for home improvement projects costing \$250 or more.

"Having something in writing is a legally binding contract that protects the consumer should problems arise," Morrisey said.

He reminds homeowners that there are several things to remember when drafting and signing a contract — including the contractor's name, address and telephone number; a description of all goods and services purchased; the price, including all credit or financing information; an approximate completion date, and the consumer's right to cancel the contract within three business days.

The contract should be

signed and dated by both the homeowner and contractor before work begins, and each party should have a copy. Failing to do so should raise a red flag for homeowners.

According to Morrisey, there are several other warning signs to watch for when it comes to recognizing untrustworthy contractors: "Avoid door-to-door work crews who pose as contractors from another job, contractors who can only be reached by leaving a message on an answering machine or cellphone, and contractors who pressure you for an immediate decision."

Fraud is not only frustrating for home owners and attorneys, but it also hinders the business of legitimate contractors.

"I would recommend that people always get multiple estimates and check references, preferably three or four: Do your homework. Evaluate them when you call them. Are they professional? Do they answer the phone?



csfb.ca.gov photo

Do they return calls timely?" said Cliff Jackson, a contractor with AllPro Home Improvement LLC. "How long have they been in busi-

ness? Do they have worker's compensation? Do they give free estimates? If you don't have a good feeling about it, listen to your gut."

When these red flags are taken into consideration, it's simple enough to point

SEE CONTRACT, 2-P

CONTRACT

FROM PAGE 1-P

out a questionable contractor. However, seeking out and hiring a trustworthy one can be a bigger challenge.

It's equally vital to know what to look for in a reputable contractor as it is to watch for warning signs.

"I keep communication open via email, text message and phone. I give customers a confirmation before we get

there and after we leave, just so they're comfortable and they know we didn't forget about them," said Zach Cook, a contractor with CRS Contracting.

"To be a good contractor, you have to call people back and answer your phone," Jackson said. "If you can't get [contractors] to answer their phone or return your call before the sale, what happens if you have a problem after the sale?"

Searching for the right

contractor to fit your home improvement needs can be stressful, especially when the possibility of a scam crosses your mind. Taking precautions can save a lot of hassle in the long run.

"If you're looking into contractors and you don't know anybody through family and friends, contact a Realtor. Contact your neighbor. Look on social media. Get word of mouth," Cook said. "That's the best form of advertising."