



Shut the Door on Door-to-Door Home Improvement Scams

From the Office of Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison

While “Marcy” was gardening in her front yard, a man approached. He told her he could repave her driveway at a “bargain price” if she paid cash today. She paid the money, and the man promised to return with a crew the next day to do the work. He never came back.

Maybe your neighborhood has seen such a scam: an unknown salesman travels from house to house offering to fix up homes or driveways at rock-bottom prices. He may give a reason why his prices are so low, like claiming to have supplies left over from another project in your neighborhood. What scammers never tell you is the “catch”: if you pay up front, they may run off with your money, leave the work undone, perform shoddy work, or overcharge you in the end.

Door-to-door scams increase during warm weather, and some scammers go from town to town ripping people off. The following are some common tactics used by scammers to defraud consumers:

Driveway Pavement Scams

Fraudsters sometimes stop at homes that have older, unpaved, or cracked driveways. They use the condition of the driveway as a pressure point, suggesting that the driveway should look more like the driveways of the homeowner’s neighbors, or indicating that a repaired driveway would raise their home value. Scammers may try to pressure homeowners to make a snap decision before they have time to shop around, often by claiming that the “bargain” offer is only available if they act now. Fraudulent operators may be quick to disappear if a homeowner pays up front.

Home Improvement Scams

Scam artists may offer to fix a window, repair a roof, or paint a house. If a homeowner pays for the work up front, the scammer may skip town, refuse to honor the deal, perform shoddy work, or stick the homeowner with an inflated bill. If the homeowner makes a partial

payment up front, the scammer may strong-arm them into a contract, or do some limited work to get the homeowner to pay additional funds before the fraudster skips town.

Security Alarm Scams

Each summer, traveling crews come to Minnesota to sell people security alarms and monthly-monitoring subscriptions. Scammers may get their foot in the door by telling homeowners the alarm is “free,” discounted, or that they are with the homeowner’s current alarm company. They may scare consumers by talking about crime in the neighborhood. Scammers may ask homeowners to sign a contract that has print so small it is unreadable. In some cases, people have signed contracts requiring payments of up to \$50 per month for five years for a security alarm that doesn’t work or that they don’t need.

Tips To Avoid Door-To-Door Home Improvement Scams

- **Don’t Fall for Pressure Tactics.** Door-to-door home improvement scams try to trick you into acting immediately, before you have time to shop around. Legitimate companies that want your business allow you time to think about the offer, research your options, and shop around. It should raise red flags if a door-to-door salesman pressures you to make an immediate decision or pay cash in advance.
- **Ask for Identification and Research the Business.** You should carefully research any business before allowing it to work on or in your home. Ask for license or permit information and whether the person is bonded. Under Minnesota law, door-to-door salespeople must clearly disclose to any potential buyer their name, the name of the business they represent, the goods

or services they wish to sell, and provide an identification card with the sales person's name and the name of the business *before* trying to sell you anything.

- **Contact the Department of Labor and Industry and Your Local Government.** Most residential building contractors must be licensed by the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry. Many municipalities also require contractors or door-to-door salespeople to hold a permit or license. Contact your local city, municipality, or county for more information on local regulations. Contact the Department of Labor and Industry as follows:

Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry

443 Lafayette Road North
St. Paul, MN 55155

(651) 284-5010 or (800) 342-5354

www.doli.state.mn.us

- **Beware of Missing Information.** Scam artists tend to use generic business names and include only a phone number on any written materials. They may drive unmarked cars or trucks. If a salesman declines to provide you with identification or other basic information, it is probably best to end the conversation.
- **Take Your Time and Shop Around.** If you would like to pursue a home improvement project, ask for references from friends and neighbors who have undertaken similar projects, and then research those businesses. The best recommendations often come from people you trust who have direct experience with a contractor. Consider asking several companies to provide you with bids.
- **Document and Read Offers and Estimates.** Carefully read any contract before you sign it. Beware of fine print that requires you to pay more than a quoted price or that obligates you to pay for unwanted services that you did not discuss

with the contractor. Ask the representative to leave the contract with you for review before you sign it.

- **Know your rights.** Under Minnesota's Right to Cancel law, consumers have three days to cancel certain types of purchases made through a door-to-door salesman. If you have signed a contract for goods or services and are having second thoughts, cancel the contract immediately to avoid being locked into unwanted purchases you made while under pressure.
- **Put Your Personal Safety First.** Don't let unknown salesmen inside your home. Scammers can be very aggressive. If you let them inside your home, they may sit down on your couch—or even your bed—and refuse to leave until you sign a contract.
- **Turn Away if You Have an Uneasy Feeling.** Listen to your instincts. If you have an uneasy feeling about a door-to-door salesperson, just say “no” and shut the door. Con artists can be persuasive: the longer you allow them to talk to you, the greater the opportunity they see to sweet talk you into making a decision you might regret. Don't continue to engage with a salesperson you have already turned down.

If you suspect a door-to-door scam is occurring in your neighborhood, promptly notify local law enforcement.

For more information, contact the Minnesota Attorney General's Office as follows:

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St. Paul, MN 55101

(651) 296-3353 (Twin Cities Calling Area)

(800) 657-3787 (Outside the Twin Cities)

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