

Don't get scammed: Protect yourself from contractor fraud

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AUSTIN, Texas — Survivors of disasters like Hurricane Harvey can be targets. Scam artists will head to disaster areas to prey on people who have already endured terrible circumstances. Posing as building contractors and other fraudulent businesses, they will try to take your money. But there are ways to protect yourself:

1. Never pay in advance. It is illegal for a contractor to require full or partial payment before disaster-remediation work in Texas.
2. Don't wire money or pay with reloadable debit cards or gift cards. There is no legitimate reason to request those forms of payment.
3. Take your time to decide. In Texas, contractors are required to provide a Notice of Cancellation — which gives you the right to change your mind within three business days — if the transaction occurs in your home. Even if the transaction does not occur in your home, you can still request three days; there is no legitimate reason to refuse this request.
4. Get the agreement in writing. Read the contract carefully, and if you don't understand every word, take it to an expert. Never sign a contract with blank spaces to be filled in.
5. Do your research. Scam artists will usually come to you to offer their services — either at your door, on the phone or through email — so be especially wary of solicitors.
 - Get estimates from multiple contractors and your insurance company. Reject any offer that seems too good to be true.
 - Ask for references from past customers.



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- Use the Better Business Bureau, www.bbb.org, and internet search engines. Fraudulent firms change names frequently, so search the web for their address and phone number, and include terms like “review,” “scam” and “complaint.”
 - Avoid out-of-town businesses, and never trust a “FEMA-certified” contractor — there is no such thing.
6. Verify insurance. Contractors should have disability and workers' compensation insurance. If they don't, you may be liable for accidents on your property.
 7. Demand satisfaction. Don't sign completion papers or make final payment until the work is done correctly.
 8. Report your concerns. Potential fraud should be reported to your local law enforcement agency. Please also inform FEMA by calling 800-621-3362 or TTY 800-462-7585, and contact the Texas Office of the Attorney General by calling 800-621-0508, emailing consumeremergency@oag.texas.gov or visiting www.texasattorneygeneral.gov.

For additional information on Hurricane Harvey and Texas recovery, visit the Hurricane Harvey disaster web page at www.fema.gov/disaster/4332, Facebook at www.facebook.com/FEMAHarvey, the FEMA Region 6 Twitter account at www.twitter.com/FEMARegion6 or the Texas Division of Emergency Management website at www.dps.texas.gov/dem.



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