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# Christie Administration Reminds Consumers, Municipalities to be On Alert for Post-Sandy Home Repair Scams

Monday, November 5, 2012 Tags: [Hurricane Sandy](#)

**Trenton, NJ** - Governor Chris Christie, Attorney General Jeffrey S. Chiesa, and the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs today reminded consumers and municipalities to be on high alert for fly-by-night, unregistered, and dishonest home improvement contractors in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

"Many New Jerseyans whose lives were turned upside down by Sandy are now able to begin to assess the damage to their homes and start focusing on recovery," Governor Christie said. "We are urging New Jersey's consumers and municipalities to beware of fly-by-night, incompetent, and dishonest contractors who will seek to profit from the misery of those affected by this storm. Contact the Division of Consumer Affairs in order to learn whether any contractor who solicits you is duly registered in New Jersey."

The Division of Consumer affairs offers tips for consumers on "How to Avoid Disaster-Related Scams" in English at [http://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/disaster/floodtipsflyer\\_1.pdf](http://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/disaster/floodtipsflyer_1.pdf) and Spanish at [http://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/disaster/floodtipsflyerSP\\_1.pdf](http://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/disaster/floodtipsflyerSP_1.pdf)

Any consumer who suspects that a business is seeking to scam consumers in the wake of Hurricane Sandy is urged to contact the Division at 800-242-5846. The Division has issued an alert to counties and municipalities, and urged them to immediately report any concerns about post-storm scams.

"During the past several days, we have received nearly 1,200 consumer complaints, primarily about alleged price gouging by gas stations, hardware stores, convenience stores, and hotels, and have issued approximately 100 subpoenas to date, to businesses accused of price gouging," Attorney General Jeffrey S. Chiesa said. "As New Jerseyans enter the recovery phase, we expect the bulk of new complaints to focus on home repair scams. No matter how pressing your need for repairs, it is absolutely important to take a step back and learn all you can about any contractor - especially if he or she comes knocking on your door or posting flyers at local stores. An unregistered or incompetent contractor can leave you with escalating costs and continuing unsafe conditions in your home."

The Division intervened in numerous consumer complaints in the days and weeks after Governor Christie in August 2011 declared a state of emergency due to Tropical Storm Irene. As one example, an Edison couple hired an unregistered, out-of-state contractor to pump raw sewage out of their flooded basement. The contractor allegedly misrepresented who would clean up the sewage after it was pumped out onto their front lawn and into the street. After being interviewed by investigators from the Division of Consumer Affairs, the unregistered contractor returned an \$8,000 check to the couple.

In addition, the Division launched an undercover operation based at a home damaged by Hurricane Irene, in order to identify unregistered contractors soliciting in the wake of that disaster. The undercover operation was conducted with the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office and Lyndhurst Police Department, The initiative resulted in criminal and civil charges against a total of 11 allegedly unregistered contractors - one of whom had a California driver's license, Massachusetts license plate, and New Jersey post office box. The unregistered contractors advertised through flyers posted in the grocery stores of storm affected areas, or through online listings. (Further details: <http://www.nj.gov/oag/ca/press/01042012.htm>).

"We have 42,000 contractors duly registered to perform home improvement work in New Jersey - so there is no need to entrust your home to a fly-by-night operator who is violating the law,"

Eric T. Kanefsky, Acting Director of the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs, said. "Take the time to fully assess the damage that must be repaired. Remember that right now it is more important than ever to obtain multiple opinions and quotes - and be absolutely sure the contractor you consider hiring is qualified, honest, and registered with the state - before you sign a contract or make a down payment."

### Tips for Consumers, When Hiring a Contractor:

Beware of fly-by-night opportunists who may have come in from out of state -- or those who may live locally but lack the skills and honesty you need for a significant repair job. Learn whether the contractor is properly registered with the Division of Consumer Affairs.

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Call the Division at 800-242-5846 to learn whether the contractor is duly registered, and whether the business has been the subject of consumer complaints. You can also check the Division's online listing of legal filings to learn whether the business has been the subject of legal action by the Division.

Before hiring a contractor, demand a copy of the contractor's liability insurance policy, and contact the insurer to make sure the policy is valid.

It is customary not to pay for the entire home improvement project in advance. The general rule of thumb is to pay no more than one-third beforehand, one-third halfway through, and one-third upon completion.

Never give your credit card number or financial information to strangers over the phone or on the Internet.

In addition, you should demand identification before you let anyone who claims to be from a utility company inspect your home.

The law requires a written contract for home improvement work in excess of \$500. The contract should include detailed information, such as start and completion dates, all work to be performed and the brands of products to be used

Acting Director Kanefsky noted that, for added convenience, consumers can use free smartphone apps, available from the Division of Consumer Affairs, to check the registration or licensing status of home improvement contractors and licensed professionals (the New Jersey "Professional License Lookup" app) and to learn about registered charities (the "Charity Search" app).

**Governor Christie, Attorney General Chiesa, and Acting Director Kanefsky also warned about charity scams that have been known to prey upon the generosity of those wishing to help during times of disaster.**

#### **When Dealing With Charities, Investigate Before You Donate:**

Before donating to a charity, find out whether the charity is registered to solicit funds in New Jersey, or is exempt from registration (certain religious and educational organizations, and charities that raise less than \$10,000 annually in contributions, are exempt).

Find out how, exactly the charity plans to use your money. Learn how much the charity spent during recent fiscal years on program costs, management costs, and fundraising. Learn about the charity's stated mission.

The charity should readily provide all of this information to you. Verify the information by calling the Division of Consumer Affairs' Charities Registration Hotline at 973-504-6215, or the [Charities Registration page](#)

Consumers who believe they have been cheated or scammed by a business, or suspect any other form of consumer abuse, can file a complaint with the State Division of Consumer Affairs by visiting its [website](#) or by calling 1-800-242-5846 (toll free within New Jersey) or 973-504-6200. Consumers can also visit <http://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/LVinfo.htm> to learn whether a contractor is duly registered with the Division.

Follow the Division of Consumer Affairs on [Facebook](#), and check our online calendar of upcoming *Consumer Outreach* events.

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