

AVOIDING HOME IMPROVEMENT SCAMS

While improving your home can increase its market value, getting nailed by a home improvement scam is a major headache. There are many honest contractors and vendors out there, but there are also some who are running a ruse. These frauds use a variety of schemes but share one thing in common: They aim to get your money.

Scam artists like these take advantage of what you don't know. They like to target older homeowners who live alone or are victims of weather-related disasters.

Here are some overall signs of a home improvement scam. If an individual does the following, you should be skeptical:

- Asks you to pay for an entire job up-front or in cash
- Is not visible online or doesn't have an actual business address
- Offers you a discount to help find other customers
- Asks you to get the required building permits
- Prices their services at extremely low, too-good-to-be-true rates
- Pressures you to act immediately to get a special offer or discount
- Says you must perform immediate repairs to your home because your safety is at risk or you are in danger
- Tries to get you to sign contracts or paperwork without reading them, or asks you to sign blank pages
- Knocks on your door, unsolicited
- Offers you free materials or a better deal because they have leftover materials from another job
- Talks fast or tries to confuse you

Driveway, chimney and roofing repair are three common scams. Another one to watch out for is the home improvement *loan* scam. Here's how they might work:

Driveway Scam: A "contractor" knocks on your door and says he (or she) has been working down the street and has some leftover materials. They noticed your driveway needs to be resealed. They say they are only charging you for labor and the cost will be extremely cheap. Once the work is done, they ask for more money and, if you refuse to pay, threaten to call the police and report you for theft of services.

Chimney or Roofing Scam: A "contractor" shows up at your door, says he (or she) has been working down the street, and couldn't help but notice you've got ice or snow damage to your chimney or roof. He appeals to your worries about the roof starting to leak or the chimney falling in, and then quotes you a low price for a minor repair. He does a small repair like replacing a shingle or patching some mortar, and then asks for a large sum of money, claiming the damage was more severe than expected.