

Don't Get Scammed: Protect Yourself from Contractor Fraud

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DENTON, Texas – State and federal recovery officials urge disaster survivors to watch for and report any suspicious activity or potential fraud.

Disasters often bring communities together but con artists, identity thieves and other criminals may target survivors. The most common types of post-disaster fraud include phony housing inspectors, fraudulent building contractors, bogus pleas for disaster donations, fake offers of municipal or federal aid and charging for free services.

Scam attempts can be made over the phone, by mail or email, through the internet, or in person. It is important to remain alert, ask questions and always ask for identification when someone claims to represent FEMA or another government agency. Con artists are creative and resourceful. If an offer sounds too good to be true, it should be questioned.

Here are some tips to protect yourself:

- Don't wire money or pay with reloadable debit cards or gift cards. There is no legitimate reason to request those forms of payment.
- Don't offer personal financial information over the phone. Know who you are dealing with and always ask for identification.
- 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.
- 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.
- Make sure the contract details all work to be performed, the costs, a projected completion date and how to negotiate changes and settle disputes.



- 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.
- 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.”
- FEMA does not certify contractors.
- Verify insurance. Contractors should have disability and workers' compensation insurance. If they don't, you may be liable for accidents on your property.
- Make sure contractors have the proper licensing and are bonded.
- Ensure the contractors obtain the necessary permits to do the job.
- Demand satisfaction. Don't sign completion papers or make final payment until the work is done correctly.
- Take a picture of your contractor, their vehicle and license plate.
- Take a picture of your contractor's business card and driver's license.
- Report your concerns. Potential fraud should be reported to your local law enforcement agency. You can also contact the [Texas Office of the Attorney General](#) by calling **800-621-0508** or call the free **FEMA Disaster Fraud Hotline at 866-720-5721** available 24-hours a day.

As a reminder, Texas homeowners and renters in the 77 counties designated for individual assistance who sustained damage may now apply for disaster assistance with FEMA.

The fastest and easiest way to apply is by visiting www.disasterassistance.gov. There is no wait to register online and it is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If it is not possible to register online, call 800-621-3362 (TTY: 800-462-7585). The toll-free telephone lines operate from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. CDT, seven days a week. Those who use a relay service such as a videophone, Innocaption or CapTel should update FEMA with their specific number assigned to that service



Low-interest disaster loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration are available to businesses, homeowners and renters. Call the SBA at 1-800-659-2955 (TTY: 800-877-8339) or visit www.sba.gov/services/disasterassistance.

