

PS COMMITTEE #2
October 2, 2014

MEMORANDUM

September 30, 2014

TO: Public Safety Committee

FROM: Susan J. Farag, Legislative Analyst *SJF*

SUBJECT: Update: Office of Consumer Protection

Today, the Committee will receive an update from the Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) on its current initiatives and future plans. The following are expected to brief the Committee:

Eric Friedman, Director of the Office of Consumer Protection
Ralph Vines, OCP
Marsha Carter, OCP

OCP Staffing and Volunteers

For FY15, OCP has 17 full time positions and one part-time position. OCP has traditionally relied extensively on volunteer assistance from both dedicated professionals and college and high school interns. OCP recently had an attorney with 35 years of mediation expertise volunteer to conduct in-depth mediation sessions for the Commission on Common Ownership (CCOC) and regular consumer cases. OCP has also submitted a proposal to receive research assistance from graduate school students enrolled at the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy, and the American University's School of Public Affairs.

One of OCP's volunteers has also recognized recently by Money magazine as a "consumer hero" (see attachment at © 1).

Information and Technology Status

As part of the Montgomery County OpenData initiative, OCP has provided data regarding the new home builder licensing and registration program. It is now available online.

OCP currently operates six primary applications. Two programs are used for the licensing and registration program. OCP licenses and registers new home builders, auto repair and towing firms, secondhand personal property dealers, and appliance repair firms. These databases are based on Access and were built over 15 years ago. They have not received upgrades. Two other programs are used by staff as a complaint tracking and case management system, as well as a tracking system for OCP's daily consultations. This case management system is also over 15 years old and in need of maintenance and enhancements.

Trespass Towing

Complaints about overly-aggressive towing continue to be one of the most common complaints filed with OCP (see attached chart at ©2). One major towing firm initiated a legal challenge to the recently-enacted State towing law. An Anne Arundel Circuit Court Judge vacated portions of the State towing law. The Maryland Attorney General has appealed the case to the Court of Special Appeals. This pending legal action has made enforcement of towing issues even more challenging for OCP and the police.

WSSC Complaints

OCP recently conducted an analysis of complaints regarding WSSC high water bills. A report was issued last spring. The complaints stemmed from significant swings in reported water usage, leading many consumers to believe they were billed incorrectly. In some cases, consumers experienced fluctuations between 5% and 100% of their normal usage. In some others, consumers experienced fluctuations between 200% and 400%. The report ultimately concluded that WSSC meter readings were accurate, but that the underlying reasons for such varied water usage often could not be determined. (Report attached at © 3-6). OCP noted that the major customer frustration and apparent deficiency in the regulatory structure appears to be a lack of independent oversight with respect to complaints. WSSC is not required to report to any independent review body.

Commission on Common Ownership Communities (CCOC)

The CCOC has created an ad hoc committee to advocate for increased staffing, resources, funding, and education activities. The committee is also assessing the CCOC's response to an ethics issue recently raised by the Montgomery County's Ethics Commission. OCP is currently serving as staff to the CCOC and is attempting to make staffing adjustments to appropriately serve the growing workload and needs of the CCOC.

EMS Patient Advocate

OCP serves as a Patient Advocate to receive and address inquiries and complaints regarding the County's Emergency Medical Services (EMS) transportation fee. OCP regularly coordinates with Fire and Rescue and their third party vendor to ensure that billing issues are promptly resolved.

Unlicensed New Home Builders, Contractors, and Illegal House Flippers

OCP is currently working with the Department of Permitting Services (DPS) to identify unlicensed home builders and illegal house flippers. OCP compares DPS permit information with MRIS real estate listing to ensure that the construction is performed by licensed contractors and that all appropriate permits and inspections are obtained and performed. Enforcement action has been taken when violations have been identified.

OCP continues to provide assistance to initiate criminal prosecution by the State's Attorney's Office against unlicensed home improvement contractors. Several cases have resulted in the District Court's awarding restitution to consumers, in addition to sentencing unlicensed contractors to jail and probation.

Outreach and Education

OCP has launched an outreach campaign for National Consumer Protection Week. Ads were designed and placed on and in Montgomery County RideOn buses. Advertising stickers were also distributed attached to a local newspaper, and OCP enhanced its communication by Facebook and Twitter. OCP staff also made presentations to community and civic associations and senior centers. OCP also continues to help produce informative episodes on Montgomery County's Cable TV show *Consumer Compass*.

Press Releases and Events

OCP recently conducted two major press conferences with the County Executive, County Police, and other County, state, and federal regulatory agencies regarding the crackdown on unlicensed home improvement contractors (see press release at © 7-8) and the IRS phone scam and Safeway recognition (see press release at © 9-10).

OCP has also conducted several live online chats with the OCP Director. One chat was geared to all types of consumer issues. Another chat was devoted to consumer protection issues affecting our Hispanic community and was translated into Spanish.

OCP's certified automotive expert investigator also served as a consultant to an NBC News hidden camera investigation regarding a nationwide chain of transmission repair shops.

Future Consumer Issues

OCP is meeting with the State Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLS) regarding its mandate to license locksmiths. Additional collaboration is being planned in order to address the unique issues created by some of these businesses.

Congressman Chris Van Hollen's office has contacted OCP regarding complaints and concerns with businesses engaged in estate sale services. A review of special practices may be needed.

New electronic payment technologies, such as reloadable credit cards, are generating issues related to protecting consumers and investigating complaints.

Discussion Issues

1. What was the impetus for establishing the ad hoc committee for the CCOC? Is the committee expected to issue a final report or request regarding staffing and resources?
2. OCP indicates it has been challenging recently to recruit new volunteers. What are some of the impediments to doing so?
3. OCP has several subject matter experts on staff and working as volunteers who help consumers with complaints involving complex technical issues, such as automotive repair and new home construction. OCP has also mentioned new technologies (such as new electronic payment methods) now in the consumer marketplace that may be challenging with respect to investigating consumer complaints. Has OCP identified a need for additional, specific staff expertise or technology in the office that would significantly assist the office in providing consumer assistance in complaints?

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FIRST HEROES

To read about more people who have made extraordinary efforts to improve others' financial well-being and to nominate your own MONEY hero, go to cnnmoney.com/heroes

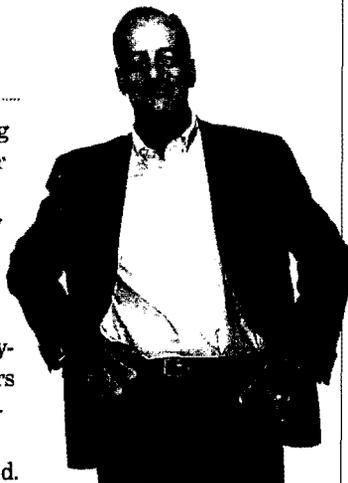


Protecting Wallets and IDs

Exposing fraudsters and helping you keep your personal data private are the consuming passions of these two MONEY heroes. —JOAN CAPLIN

DAVID LESSER, 57 CONSUMER PROTECTION VOLUNTEER

A onetime bank general counsel who was winding down his own small manufacturing firm, Lesser answered a 2010 call for volunteers from the Office of Consumer Protection in Montgomery County, Md. Drawing on his legal expertise, he spends 15 hours a week investigating and resolving complaints; he's recovered tens of thousands of dollars so far. A big victory: identifying hundreds of plumbers who charged customers an average of \$85 for sham permits when installing appliances—then getting retailers that had hired the scammers to guard against future fraud.



“People often need help in when seeking redress. It takes a certain kind of persistence and skill to succeed.”



BETH GIVENS, 62 PRIVACY ACTIVIST

Working on a grant in the early 1990s to teach Californians about telephone technology, the former librarian got hooked on consumer education. Her next project was to launch, in 1992, the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, which Givens still runs. The nonprofit publishes educational materials, collects reports of online privacy abuses, and pushes for safeguards like California's ID theft registry, created in 2000 to help clear victims saddled with impostors' criminal records. Her latest worry: the possible misuse of facial-recognition technology.

“Eventually, walking down the street, you could have no privacy. You could not expect to ever be anonymous.”

Shop Online, Unobserved

On an airline's website, you price a trip to Vegas—and soon you see casino ads all over the Net. Coincidence? No, just tags that track your clicks and cue those creepy pitches. Shake them off with these measures:



CUT THE COOKIES.

In your browser's privacy settings, block third-party cookies to make it tougher for marketers to keep tabs on you. While there, check the “do not track” request, the online equivalent of a do-not-call list, says Joseph Lorenzo Hall of the Center for Democracy & Technology.



SEE WHO'S WATCHING.

Visit a single site and you might pick up dozens of tracking tags that tail you on the web. The free browser extension Ghostery (at ghostery.com) lets you see them and decide which to nix. For shutting out third-party ads, Peter Eckersley of the Electronic Frontier Foundation suggests the free AdBlock Plus extension (adblockplus.org).

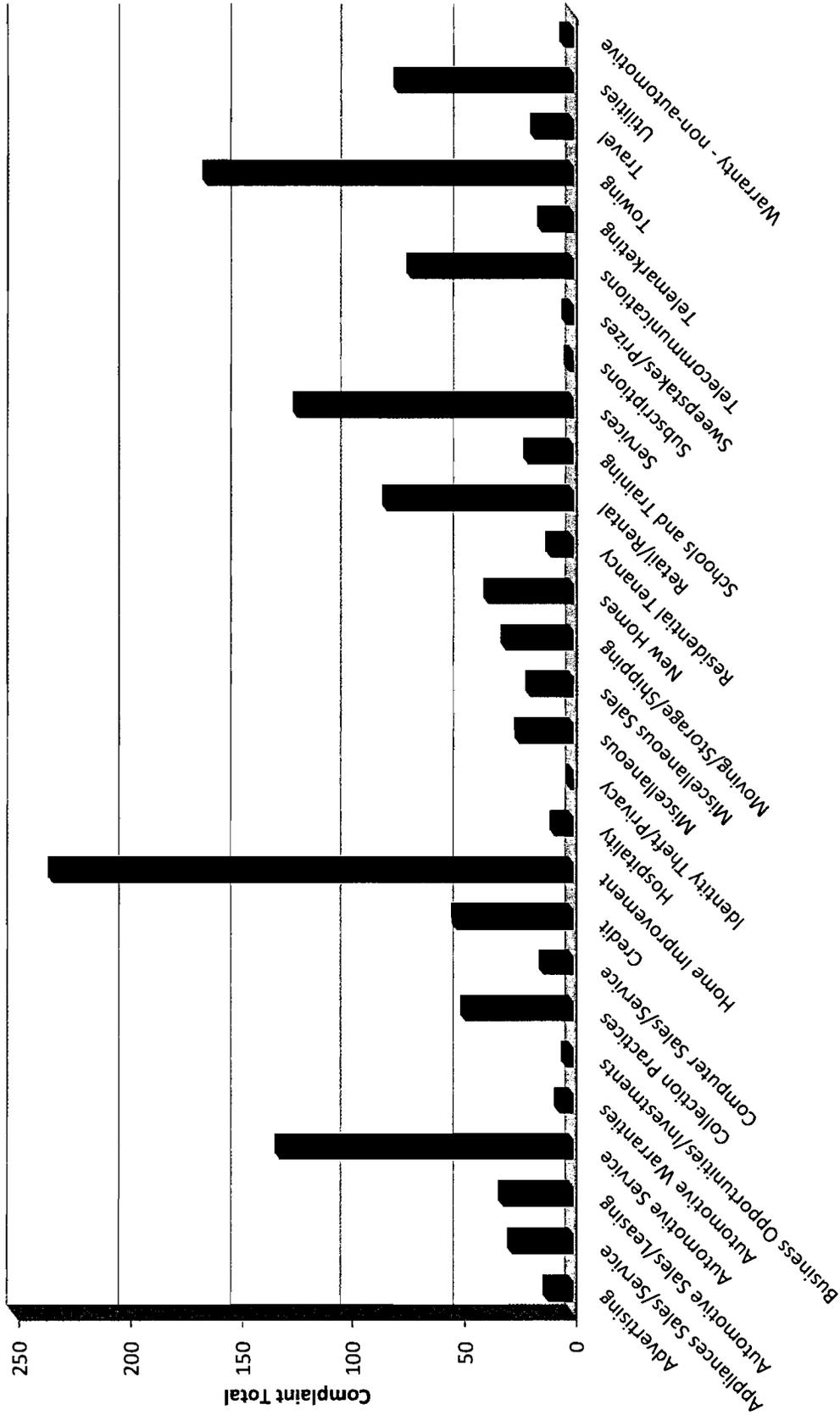


GET AN E-MAIL ALIAS.

Finding you online via your e-mail address—obtained from your loyalty card, perhaps—marketers can link your online and offline behavior and solicit you accordingly. To prevent this, Stefen Smith of information security firm SecureForce advises setting up an e-mail account solely for commercial transactions. —SARAH MAX



Office of Consumer Protection FY14 - Complaints by Category





OFFICE OF CONSUMER PROTECTION

Isiah Leggett
County Executive

Eric S. Friedman
Director

MEMORANDUM

June 16, 2014

TO: Roger Berliner, Councilmember
Montgomery County Council

FROM: Eric Friedman, Director *E.F.*
Office of Consumer Protection

RE: WSSC Water Bills

You requested that our office review information you obtained from the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) and further review complaints from residents regarding higher than normal water bills.

Our office has analyzed the information. Attached is our report along with the background information. Our office will continue to handle the individual complaints filed with our office on a case-by-case basis and will continue to work with WSSC to determine what adjustments may be appropriate and to provide information to consumers.

We trust that this report may be of value to you. Please feel free to contact me if any additional information is requested. Thank you.

ESF/wd

WSSC Water Bills Inquiry – June 16, 2014
Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection

In April 2014, OCP began an inquiry into complaints about WSSC water bills after receiving the names and addresses of approximately 50 residents of MC who contacted Councilmember Roger Berliner, County Executive Ike Leggett, or the Office of Consumer Protection. These residents believed that water bills they received from WSSC were incorrect and higher than normal. (see Councilmember Berliner letters and newspaper articles – attachment A).

This large a number of complaints regarding WSSC water bills has not been received by our office at any time during the past 30 years. In addition, these complaints appear to have been exacerbated by the severe winter weather conditions which prohibited WSSC from reading meters in a timely fashion and resulted in longer than usual "quarterly" billing cycles.

OCP reviewed information WSSC provided to Councilmember Berliner, reviewed documentation provided by residents, and obtained first-hand information in the field from a WSSC meter reader. In addition, OCP reviewed State of Maryland statutes regarding water utilities, requested an opinion from the Office of the County Attorney, and gathered general information from other water utilities. (see County Attorney Memorandum and State Code – attachment B).

Residents filing complaints typically make reference to how much more they were required to pay WSSC from one bill compared to previous WSSC bills. However, while the amount the resident is told to pay may be upsetting to consumers, the dollar amount referenced in a WSSC bill is not of value for comparison purposes. The length of each billing cycle varies and the rates change periodically. Only the amount of water usage (Average Daily Consumption) is appropriate to be used for comparison purposes.

WSSC and consumers typically assert contradictory conclusions to explain identical facts. Both contradictory conclusions may be equally plausible and may be impossible to prove. For example, where there is a spike in water usage followed by a return to normal usage, the consumer may conclude that WSSC misread the meter or that the meter malfunctioned. However, WSSC may conclude that the consumer used more water or had an intermittent leak.

While there is no "one size fits all" explanation for each consumer's allegations, there appear to be a limited number of possible explanations for why water usage and the corresponding water bill may be higher than usual:

- the consumer used more water,
- the consumer had a leak (permanent or intermittent),
- the meter was not properly read by WSSC, or
- the meter was not properly operating.

In some instances a spike in water usage was followed by a return to normal water usage readings. In some cases the fluctuations were 200% to 400% while other consumers experienced fluctuations of 5% to 100%. In some cases, the fluctuations resulted in lower usage as well as in higher usage and bills (see OCP chart – attachment C).

WSSC's responses to complaints from residents regarding high water usage and bills are generally limited in number. In the majority of cases, WSSC has confirmed that its bills are accurate. In many cases the underlying cause of any spike in usage will remain a mystery, as no definitive answer is ascertainable. (See WSSC Press Release regarding higher water bills and WSSC letters with charts – attachment D).

WSSC maintains several internal mechanisms and procedures to address billing dispute complaints from consumers:

- Consumers may first contact WSSC's "Customer Relations Group" to seek assistance regarding billing disputes.
- With regard to unpaid charges, consumers may then file a complaint with WSSC's "Dispute Resolving Board." By statute, the DRB may only grant adjustments that are authorized by approved WSSC policies and procedures.
- With regard to paid charges, consumers may file a claim for a "Refund Hearing."
- Subject to available funding, WSSC also offers "Residential Bill Adjustments" of 50% of the excess water/sewer usage to individual customers once every seven (7) years if the water consumption increases at least three (3) times greater than normal usage.
- On occasion WSSC may offer to waive the cost to have a WSSC inspector visit a consumer's home to look for water leaks (currently \$70.).
- On occasion WSSC may offer to waive the cost to have WSSC remove and bench test a meter (currently \$190.).

WSSC maintains approximately 475,000 residential water meters in Montgomery County. Approximately 161,000 meters are located in a hole or "pit" in the ground outside each resident's house. Approximately 313,154 are found inside each resident's house; of which approximately 19,000 can only be read by WSSC by going inside the consumer's house. In addition WSSC maintains 386 "Automatic Meter Reader" residential water meters that can be read by WSSC using "drive-by" electronic technology.

Other local water utility companies appear to have more sophisticated meter reading capabilities. "Automatic Meter Readers" enable a utility company to "drive-by" a resident's home and retrieve/record the meter reading without having to physically see or touch the metering device and without having to manually input a series of numbers. All of the residential water meters in the City of Rockville are read by the utility company using "drive-by" technology. In addition, most of the water meters in Howard County are read electronically via radio interface, thereby minimizing human error (see attachment E).

Summary

The major customer frustration and apparent deficiency in the regulatory structure regarding these issues appears to be a lack of independent oversight with respect to WSSC and complaints regarding WSSC bills. All of the current avenues of redress for consumers with regard to billing disputes are administered within WSSC and without requiring WSSC to report to any independent review body. The limited review of WSSC rates by the Montgomery County and Prince George's County Councils does not appear to provide any oversight regarding complaints against WSSC, including billing disputes. In addition, the Maryland Public Service Commission does not take complaints, such as billing disputes, regarding municipally-owned water companies. Accordingly, it appears that WSSC does not "report" to any independent review body with regard to billing disputes and related issues.

While the extent to which these consumer complaints regarding high water bills may or may not be related to inaccurate meter reading by WSSC, the lack of more sophisticated "drive-by" electronic meter reading technology as employed by other local water jurisdictions gives the appearance that WSSC's meter reading infrastructure and capabilities are antiquated by comparison and therefore potentially subject to inaccurate readings.

WSSC appears to maintain extensive and detailed documentation regarding many operational issues. Further inquiry may be needed by an independent reviewer with specialized utility expertise in order to shed any additional light regarding these high water bill complaints and related issues.



News Releases

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND



For Immediate Release: 9/22/2014

Leggett Warns Consumers about IRS Telephone Scam; Recognizes Safeway for Corporate Action

Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett today announced a warning from Montgomery County's Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) and Montgomery County Police Financial Crimes Section, about a nationwide telephone scam that relies upon intimidation to steal millions of dollars from consumers.

Telephone scammers contact consumers and assert that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has prepared a warrant for their arrest and that the warrant will be served if the consumer does not immediately send money in order to mitigate the criminal charges. Federal authorities state that more than 1,000 victims nationwide have lost more than \$5 million to these con artists who pose as IRS agents and tell people that they will be arrested if they don't immediately pay thousands of dollars in unpaid taxes.

"When these types of consumer scams pop up in Montgomery County we want to get the word out to our residents not to fall prey to such deception," said Leggett. "There are new schemes being concocted every day, and unknowing consumers are the prime target."

A Montgomery County victim reports that the scam artist possessed the ability to instill fear and create a sense of urgency. The victim reports that the con artist told him that the IRS has been investigating his tax returns for the past six years and that they discovered tax code violations that required an immediate payment of \$7,130 to stop the legal process. The con artist asked for the consumer's cell phone number and told the victim that he needed to remain on the phone the entire time while completing the payments. The victim was directed to obtain reloadable cash cards to make the payment. The consumer went to a Safeway store to purchase six Green Dot® reloadable cash cards.

This consumer lost over \$3,000 in this scam, and was about to send and lose an additional \$4,000, if not for the intervention of staff at the Safeway store.

County Executive Isiah Leggett is commending the cashier and manager at Safeway for their intervention and for the corporate training they received from Safeway management to identify scams in progress.

"We are extremely pleased and proud that our employees – store manager Mark Woodfield and employee Patricia Keller – played a vital role in preventing a customer from having several thousand dollars stolen from them," said Safeway Eastern Division President Brian Baer. "We have provided extensive training to our retail team urging them to be vigilant in these situations. It is very satisfying to see our efforts being translated into a beneficial outcome on behalf of a valued customer."

Internal Revenue Service Senior Relationship Tax Consultant Anita Carter joined Leggett in this announcement and provided valuable information advising consumers that the IRS does not call consumers and threaten to arrest them if they don't immediately send money.

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“These telephone scams are being seen in every part of the country, and we urge people not to be deceived,” said IRS Commissioner John Koskinen. “There are clear warning signs about these scams, which continue at high levels throughout the nation. Taxpayers should remember their first contact with the IRS will not be a call from out of the blue, but through official correspondence sent through the mail.”

The local victim has filed a report with the Montgomery County Police Financial Crimes Section. The federal Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (TIGTA) warns that this is the “largest ever” phone fraud scam targeting taxpayers. Victims may file a complaint online at http://www.treasury.gov/tigta/contact_report_scam.shtml.

OCP, the County’s consumer protection agency, investigates thousands of complaints each year involving automotive sales and repairs, new home purchases, home improvements, credit issues, retail sales, internet services and most other consumer transactions. OCP provides pre-purchase information to consumers, as well as speakers to the community on consumer issues.

For more information, call 240-777-3636 or visit OCP’s website at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer.

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Media Contact: Sue Tucker 240-777-6507

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News Releases

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND



For Immediate Release: 6/6/2014

Leggett Announces Collaborative Effort to Crack Down on Unlicensed Home Improvement Contractors

Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett today announced a collaborative effort between the Montgomery County Police, the Office of Consumer Protection, the State's Attorney's Office, the Maryland Home Improvement Commission, the Department of Natural Resources and the police departments of neighboring jurisdictions to crack down on unlicensed home improvement contractors. Law enforcement agencies in the region will share information and work cooperatively to file criminal charges against these individuals who have victimized homeowners, stealing millions of dollars.

Speaking at the home of a Rockville resident who was victimized by an individual who knocked on her door and offered to cut some tree branches, Leggett expressed confidence that this collaboration will result in even more arrests and convictions.

"Vulnerable homeowners – especially seniors – need to be vigilant when hiring a contractor," said Leggett. "These illegal and unscrupulous merchants seek to take advantage of consumers, especially during the warm weather months and after every storm.

"Our message is simple: if you try to rip off our residents, we will track you down and prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law."

"During one investigation I started off with a single scam victim, but later found 80 more victims of the same suspect," said Montgomery County Police Lieutenant Michael Hartnett. "There are more than 300 unlicensed tree cutters, also known as 'woodchucks,' who have been identified by law enforcement and new ones continue to show up."

Law enforcement personnel from multiple jurisdictions are sharing information regarding unscrupulous contractors who are defrauding homeowners in Montgomery County and surrounding areas. These unlicensed contractors typically victimize consumers by going door-to-door soliciting payment in exchange for making repairs.

Repairs usually involve roofs, driveways or damaged trees. However, in many cases, after being paid unconscionably high fees, the "contractors" may leave without making any repairs or only engage in shoddy work. Many of the unlicensed contractors come from out-of-state and may have criminal records.

"Don't be fooled by an unlicensed contractor who offers to do a job at a lower price than a licensed contractor," cautioned Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation Secretary Leonard Howie. "It may seem like a great deal at first, but it may cost much more money in the end to repair shoddy work or to pay another contractor to complete the work if the unlicensed contractor takes your money and never returns."

Montgomery County Police, Financial Crimes Section, offers homeowners the following warning signs:

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- Contractors going door-to-door soliciting home improvement work;
- Contractors driving vehicles with out-of-state license plates and without a business name and license number printed on the vehicle; and
- Contractors who offer to drive a consumer to the bank or ATM in order to receive payment.

The Office of Consumer Protection urges consumers to follow these steps before entering a contract for any home improvement work:

- Do not panic and hire someone because they are the only company that can come out to the house right away. Make sure the home improvement contractor is licensed with the Maryland Home Improvement Commission (MHIC) by calling 410-230-6309 or check [online](#).

Also, make sure the contractor is familiar with and has expertise in repairing the type of damage that your house has sustained, such as roofing or foundation repair.

- For tree service or removal, check to see if the business is a licensed tree expert with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Forestry Division, at 410-260-8521 or online at www.dnr.maryland.gov. If a licensed company is used, there is a complaint process through the Department of Natural Resources. If an unlicensed company is used, it is often impossible to track down the company, particularly if they have been paid in advance. In addition, consumers should ask to see written verification of the company's insurance and workers compensation coverage.

- Get estimates from three contractors. Some fraudulent contractors will capitalize on the situation and overcharge consumers or lead them to believe the damage is worse than it really is. State law requires a written contract for any work completed. A home improvement contract should include the terms and conditions of the warranty. The manufacturer's warranty should be a separate, written document. The contract must also include: the contractor's name, address and home improvement license number; the approximate starting and finishing dates; and a description of the work to be done and materials to be used.

- State law prohibits home improvement contractors from collecting more than one-third of the contract amount as a deposit. If the contract is signed in your home, the contract must allow the consumer three days in which to cancel. Under emergency situations only, the consumer may waive this three-day right to cancel, but must sign a special form to do so.

- Check the contractors' complaint records with the Office of Consumer Protection at 240-777-3636 or online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer and the Better Business Bureau at 202-393-8000 or online at www.dc.bbb.org and with the MHIC and DNR.

OCP, the County's consumer protection agency, investigates thousands of complaints each year involving automotive sales and repairs, new home purchases, home improvements, credit issues, retail sales, internet services and most other consumer transactions. OCP provides pre-purchase information to consumers, as well as speakers to the community on consumer issues.

For more information, call 240-777-3636 or visit OCP's website at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer.

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Media Contact: Sue Tucker 240-777-6507

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News Releases

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND



For Immediate Release: 3/4/2014

Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection Launches Outreach Campaign to Highlight National Consumer Protection Week

Montgomery County's Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) is joining federal, state and local government agencies and other national consumer advocacy organizations to celebrate National Consumer Protection Week (NCPW), March 2 – 8.

Montgomery County's award-winning consumer protection office was established more than 40 years ago as a law enforcement agency to help eliminate deceptive trade practices in the marketplace. OCP investigates and resolves consumer disputes, provides consumer education, licenses certain businesses and administers programs affecting the quality of life in Montgomery County.

This year, in recognition of NCPW, the Office of Consumer Protection has launched a comprehensive outreach campaign to ensure that underserved residents in Montgomery County are aware of the unique services and assistance provided by the office. The campaign includes:

- Advertisements on the interior and exterior of Ride-On buses [\[link to ad\]](#)
- Direct mail information in formats commonly used by merchants
- "Sticky" advertising labels on local newspapers
- Public service announcements on local radio stations [\[link to audio\]](#)
- Promotions for OCP's Anonymous Tip Line where consumers can report fraud [\[link to card\]](#)
- Consumer education presentations to senior groups
- A town hall meeting with US Congressman Chris Van Hollen
- Additional episodes of the cable TV show, "Consumer Compass" [\[link to Youtube\]](#)
- Expansion of social media presence on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram
- Distribution of OCP brochures at all public library branches

On Wednesday, March 5, at 11 a.m., OCP staff and volunteers will participate in a photo opportunity at the Rockville Ride-On Bus Depot to help place the new advertisements on and in the buses.

For the youngest consumers, OCP is sponsoring a "Catch the Consumer Bus" contest. Kids are being asked to take a photo of any Ride-On bus they see with OCP's advertisement on the outside and send the photo to OCP via Instagram or Facebook. The most interesting photo each week will be featured on [OCP's website](#).

"We are fortunate to have a vibrant and active consumer protection office in Montgomery County," said OCP Director Eric Friedman. "With the support and resources provided by our elected officials, our office is uniquely able to 'Ensure Integrity in the Marketplace' for all of our residents and businesses."

OCP, the County's consumer protection agency, investigates thousands of complaints each year involving automotive sales and repairs, new home purchases, home improvements, credit issues, retail sales, internet services and most other consumer transactions. OCP provides pre-purchase information to consumers, as well as speakers to the community on consumer issues.

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For more information, and to check any merchant's complaint record, call 240-777-3636 or visit OCP's website at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer.

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News Releases

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND



For Immediate Release: 8/27/2013

Office of Consumer Protection Obtains Refunds for Consumers Due to Improper Towing

Montgomery County's Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) has contacted approximately 60 individuals to advise them that they are eligible to receive refunds of more than \$150 each as a result of their vehicles being improperly towed out of a shopping center in downtown Silver Spring.

OCP conducted an investigation into the impound towing of vehicles parked in a shopping center located at the intersection of Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road after receiving information from a local television news station. OCP determined that from October 1, 2012 until March 15, 2013, the parking restriction signs posted at the shopping center were not in full compliance with both the County and State trespass towing laws.

"Trespass towing complaints are frequently the largest category of complaints we receive," said OCP Director Eric Friedman. "We urge all drivers to be vigilant in carefully reading all parking restriction signs at shopping centers and to file a complaint with OCP if they believe abuses have occurred."

OCP entered into a settlement agreement with the owners of the shopping center in which the owner agreed to correct all the deficiencies with the County and State trespass towing laws and has made arrangements to provide full refunds to consumers. OCP has obtained the names and addresses of approximately 58 vehicle owners and has attempted to reach them to advise that they are eligible to receive a full refund of the money they paid to the towing firm in order to retrieve their vehicles.

OCP's webpage, www.montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer, contains comprehensive information about the County's trespass towing law and the trespass towing law that was newly enacted by the State of Maryland. Many consumers may not realize the extent to which parking restrictions are strictly enforced in Montgomery County and may not be aware of all of the complexities of the laws. Consumers with questions or concerns are urged to contact OCP to speak with an investigator.

OCP, the County's consumer protection agency, investigates thousands of complaints each year involving automotive sales and repairs, new home purchases, home improvements, credit issues, retail sales, internet services and most other consumer transactions. OCP provides pre-purchase information to consumers, as well as speakers to the community on consumer issues.

For more information and to check any merchant's complaint record, call 240-777-3636, email consumerprotection@montgomerycountymd.gov, or visit OCP's website at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer.

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Release ID: 13-250

Media Contact: Sue Tucker 240-777-6507

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News Releases

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND



For Immediate Release: 7/18/2013

Office of Consumer Protection Volunteer Recognized as "Consumer Hero" by Money Magazine

Montgomery County's Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) volunteer David Lesser is highlighted in the July 2013 issue of Money magazine as a "consumer hero" in its regular, monthly column called "Money Heroes." Lesser is recognized for his service to OCP providing assistance with investigating and resolving consumer complaints regarding new home construction, home improvements and retail sales.

Lesser is a retired attorney who, for the past three years, has been a volunteer with OCP. In the fall of 2011, he was instrumental in OCP's major investigation regarding the installation and inspection of gas appliances.

"Our office is fortunate to have a talented team of volunteers working in collaboration with our staff," said OCP Director Eric Friedman. "The expertise and dedication of volunteers like David Lesser enable us to leverage our capabilities to provide even better service to the residents of Montgomery County."

Montgomery County's Office of Consumer Protection, established in 1971, has garnered a national reputation working closely with other government agencies and non-profit organizations. OCP has always maintained an active volunteer recruitment and training program. Currently there are a dozen volunteers who work in the office, several of whom previously worked as OCP investigators.

Lesser and OCP's squad of volunteers were previously featured in a February 2011 Washington Post article and were recently featured in a episode of "Consumer Compass," a show airing on Montgomery County's cable TV channel. In addition, OCP's volunteer program received a National Association of Counties Achievement Award in 2012 for its online application process and data base.

OCP, the County's consumer protection agency, investigates thousands of complaints each year involving automotive sales and repairs, new home purchases, home improvements, credit issues, retail sales, internet services and most other consumer transactions. OCP provides pre-purchase information to consumers, as well as speakers to the community on consumer issues.

For more information and to check any merchant's complaint record, call 240-777-3636 or visit OCP's website at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer.

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News Releases

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND



For Immediate Release: 11/29/2012

County's Office of Consumer Protection Featured on ABC TV 20/20

Montgomery County's Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) will be featured in an upcoming segment of ABC News "20/20" on Friday, November 30, at 10 p.m.

The 20/20 segment focuses on predatory and aggressive towing practices. In the segment, ABC News Senior Correspondent Jim Avila interviews OCP director Eric Friedman regarding trespass towing and the complaints handled by OCP's investigators.

"I am proud of the work done by our Office of Consumer Protection and I am pleased that they are receiving national exposure on ABC 20/20," said Montgomery County Executive Ike Leggett. "Our consumer protection office recently celebrated its 40th anniversary, and its activities have previously been reported on national television shows."

OCP, the County's consumer protection agency, investigates thousands of complaints each year involving automotive sales and repairs, new home purchases, home improvements, credit issues, retail sales, Internet services and most other consumer transactions. OCP provides pre-purchase information to consumers, as well as speakers to the community on consumer issues.

For more information and consumer advice, call 240-777-3636 or visit [OCP's website](#).

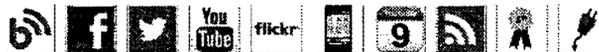
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