

7 On Your Side: Beware of Craigslist car repair scammers

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MCLEAN, Va. (WJLA) – Car repair scammers show up in parking lots—or even your own driveway—claiming they can fix the dings and paint scratches on your car at little cost. But if you let down your guard, you could end up with even more damage and an empty wallet.



Matt McCollum and his damaged Infiniti. (WJLA photo)

At a distance, Matt McCollum's Infiniti looks flawless, but get a little closer and the damage is apparent.

"There's just nicks and dings all over the car," McCollum said.

The damage on McCollum's car is worse than it was when he bought it.

"He spray painted here and it's all sticky, and it's just a big, nasty mess there now," he said.

McCollum's car is now a patchwork of sanded scratches, sloppy patches and mismatched paint; it's work left behind by a so-called mobile car repairman he found on Craigslist.

"He goes, 'Leave everything, don't touch anything, wait three or four days, go to the car wash, and then everything will be perfect, buddy,'" McCollum said.

Not quite; McCollum is now out more than \$400 in what experts call a classic scam.

"These people are slick," said Eric Friedman, with the Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection. "Keep in mind, if they were not convincing, they'd have to get a real job like the rest of us."

Why would they want to, when Friedman says car repair scammers can steal hundreds of dollars and disappear?

"These guys will do terrible work, they're unlicensed, shoddy work, wrong materials," he said. "They'll probably cause more problems. They'll take the money and run."

Catching these crooks is nearly impossible, because the scammers constantly switch their ads on Craigslist, using different names and phone numbers. They also won't give you much information when you meet them in person.

7 On Your Side took our hidden camera to see how these companies work, calling one man whose ad we found on the web. In just a 60-second scan, he determined he could fix all our scratches for \$400.

"I could fill it with a primer, put a nice coat of paint on there and make it look really nice," he told us.

But when he couldn't provide a business card, driver's license or business license, so we'd know he was legitimate, we opted out. Friedman says many consumers don't.

"If someone just drives up to you, they're gonna drive away and you're never gonna find them again," Friedman said.

Sometimes, Friedman's office does; it helped bust two men—mobile repairmen who approached an 89-year-old man in a shopping center, charging \$500 for sloppy repairs that cost even more to fix.

"A lot of times, consumers will say, 'But I thought I could trust the guy,'" Friedman said. "Well, they hope that you get that impression and they're good at doing that ... that's why they're called scammers."

McCollum didn't catch his scammer, but he hopes his pricey lesson can be a warning for someone else.