

Friday, June 06, 2014

## Montgomery warns of unscrupulous contractors

*Prosecutor pledges to 'prosecute to the full extent of the law'*

By Ryan Marshall Staff Writer

Jim Crutchfield thought he was doing everything right when he hired a roofer to work on his Cabin John home.

The roofer had references who gave good reports of his work when Crutchfield called them.

The contractor said he had a license to do roofing jobs, but Crutchfield didn't ask to see the license before the work began in December 2012.

Crutchfield said the man made plenty of promises to finish the work but failed to do so, ultimately even removing part of the work that had been done and saying he didn't have enough money to finish.

Crutchfield said the experience that ultimately cost him about \$8,000 was frustrating, but he learned a valuable lesson.

Crutchfield's lesson was the same that all homeowners should learn before letting anyone do work on or around their house, said Eric Friedman, director of Montgomery County's Office of Consumer Protection.

"You really need to make sure they've got their license," Friedman said.

On Friday, Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) announced a renewed effort by police and county departments to crack down on "rip-off artists" who target residents with fraudulent offers to do projects such as roof or driveway repair or tree work or removal.

"We will not tolerate the victimization of our residents, particularly our seniors," Leggett said.

Leggett appeared with representatives from the Montgomery County Police Department, Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office, Montgomery's Office of Consumer Protection, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the state Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation and police from other jurisdictions.

They spoke at the Rockville home of Selma Nootenboom, an elderly woman who was charged \$2,000 for tree work despite agreeing to only pay \$700.

Nootenboom is legally blind and hard of hearing, her nephew Eric Barr said Friday.

The man took one branch off, filled a small hole with cement and charged her \$2,000, Barr said.

The county was eventually able to get the money back, he said.



Dan Gross/The Gazette

Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (left) and law enforcement hold a press conference at the home of Selma Nootenboom who was the victim of a scam by an unlicensed tree cutter. Nootenboom and her nephew, Eric Barr, at right, listen to Leggett.



According to Montgomery County police, a victim in Chevy Chase paid four contractors a total of \$80,000 to perform the same job, while another resident in the southern part of the county paid \$160,000 for three different roof jobs and trimming and cutting of various trees.

An elderly county resident paid \$240,000 for work at his home with few results, according to police.

Unsolicited contractors, or “woodchucks,” often provide a low estimate for how much work will cost, said Lt. Michael Hartnett of the Montgomery County Police Department.

The problem is not just one for Montgomery County, but for the Washington region, costing between \$2 million and \$3 million regionally each year, he said.

Deputy State’s Attorney John Maloney said his office welcomes the increased focus on the issue as they go after anyone who preys on the county’s most vulnerable residents.

“We will prosecute you, and we will prosecute to the full extent of the law,” Maloney said.

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