

Georgetown Police Advisory

April 18, 2009

Now that the warm weather is upon us, the “Springtime Scams” are already starting to bloom in communities not too far from us. These scams include home improvement and driveway paving. These crimes are usually committed by organized groups of people that migrate into this area from out of state.

These groups are also involved in “Imposter” crimes where they pretend to be utility employees and tell their victims that they need to get into the basement of their homes so that they can check the water pipes or gas line connections. The imposters will usually travel in pairs. One suspect will divert the homeowner by showing them possible problems with pipes in the basement, while the other will steal money, jewelry and electronics from the home.

We experienced one of these diversion crimes a few years ago where someone had approached an elderly resident in town pretending to be a Surveyor. The suspect told the resident he needed his assistance in checking the fence line. While the diversion was going on, another party had entered the home and located an unlocked safe and stole thousands of dollars from the victim.

The driveway and roofing scams are usually played out like this- a group will show up at a home in trucks with no company names printed on them. The trucks will usually have out of state plates attached. Someone will approach the homeowner and tell them that that they had just completed a paving job in the area, and still have some asphalt left over and need to get rid of it. They will offer you a bargain basement price to pave your driveway as long as the job is paid for up front in either cash or check.

Sometimes they will run out of the product and ask for more money so that they can purchase more asphalt, and never return to complete the job. Or they may simply not do what was initially agreed upon, and then “over charge” you for the job if they have to do it “Your” way.

The asphalt that the suspects use is usually of very low quality and never hardens up. Normal asphalt takes a day or so to set, but the product they use does not. By the time the victim realizes what has occurred, the suspects have left the area with plenty of time to cash the check and move on.

The roofing scams occur in pretty much the same way. The suspects will approach a homeowner and relate that his company will spray a waterproof coating on the roof to help prevent any type of leaking. Usually all they spray on the roof is water mixed with used motor oil that does nothing to protect the roof. Again, they want either cash or a check and off they go.

They will usually use the same technique for home improvement scams. They will approach the homeowner and say that they are trying to promote business in the area and will give a low price for work to be performed. They will give an estimate and then ask for a large portion of the money up front to pay for materials and supplies.

Although it is very common for legitimate contractor’s to ask for one third of the price up front for jobs, the scammers will take the money and leave the area never to return to do any work.

These thieves are experts at scamming people! They will come to the area; scam you out of your money, and then return back home. They never utilize contracts, and phone numbers that they provide may lead to generic answering machines with no company name, or a message that the number has been disconnected. They will usually target the elderly, but anyone is fair game to their scams.

As alarming as this may sound, there are a few things that people can do to help protect themselves from being a victim of these scams. First and foremost, be very wary of people coming to your home offering unsolicited goods and services at bargain basement prices. If it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is!

Granted, there are a lot of legitimate hardworking people out there who do conduct their business by going from home to home. They want to make a good impression, and they do honestly want you as a customer.

If it doesn't need to be repaired, don't fix it! High pressure tactics are a way to get you to purchase or repair things you really don't want or need. Simply say, "No Thanks", and close your door.

If you are really interested in repairing your home or having your driveway paved, then the most reliable way to find a legitimate contractor is to use the business section of your phone book. Or better still, speak with a friend or neighbor who has recently had the same type of work done at their home. See if they are happy with the job that was done. If so, ask for the company's name and phone number.

When choosing any type of contractor or before having any type of work performed, follow these tips. Insist on a written, detailed contract. Review the contract carefully and make sure it contains the contractor's registration number, their address, the start and estimated completion dates of the job, the total amount to be paid, and a list of specifications and materials.

Ask for proof that your contractor is insured and has insurance that will cover your job. Make sure your contractor applies for and obtains any applicable building permits. Also make sure you discuss any warranties on the work to be performed or the products used.

To check on a contractor's references and complaint history, visit www.mass.gov/consumer and click on the "For Consumers" tab. This site will also give you access to a wealth of other very useful information. You can also check to see if a contractor is registered with the Massachusetts Board of Building Regulators & Standards by calling (617) 727-3200.

Lastly, don't be an unsuspecting victim to a scam artist! If you feel you are being scammed, please call us right away. The last thing we want to see is another one of our residents lose their hard earned money to these thieves.

If residents still have any questions about home improvement or any other type of scams, please feel free to contact the Detective Division of the Georgetown Police Department at (978) 352-5700. We are always available to assist you.