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Beware: With the flood repair can come contractor scams

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As we recover from the recent flooding in Rhode Island, our members will find many opportunities to help those affected and to pick up some much needed work. One way you can help the public, and especially your own potential customers, is to warn them about the illegal contractors and other scam artists who, unfortunately, follow in the wake of every natural disaster.

These scammers take advantage of the most vulnerable people, recommending expensive or unnecessary repairs, sometimes on flood-prone homes that are so damaged they are not worth saving. Scammers may ask for social security numbers, cash deposits or advance payments in full with a promise to speed up insurance payments or building permits.

Be on the lookout for these crooks, and report them to the Rhode Island Contractors' Registration and Licensing Board (CRLB) at (401) 222-1268. This is a chance to get some of these outlaw contractors off the streets, where they take away business that rightly belongs to those of us who obey the law.

In the meantime, use your company newsletter and other marketing tools, social networking and blog sites, and even the local media if you can, to warn the public in your area to reject people who knock on their doors, offer services, then pressure homeowners to hire them on the spot.

While the whole situation in Rhode Island may seem desperate for many, our members need to remind people that the only way to avoid being scammed by a flood damage cleanup company is to be sensible and ask questions. Where's your state registration card? Where's your proof of insurance? Where are your references?

Urge people to double check any contractor's registration with the CRLB (www.crb.ri.gov). Just as important, have them check the "Find a Member" page at The Rhode Island Builders Association's website, www.ribuilders.org.

It's also a good idea for homeowners to ask:

- * How many years has the contractor been in business?
- * How many similar projects have they done?
- * Do they belong to RIBA?
- * Have they earned any special training or certifications?
- * What is the warranty policy?
- * Will they provide a list of references, both recent customers and regular suppliers, whom the homeowner can contact?

After these initial steps, let people know that they need to ask for a written cost estimate and contract from the flood damage cleanup company. A contract protects the interests of both parties, and a reliable contractor should not hesitate to provide them with one.

Tell them to beware of any contractor who is looking to generate quick cash by a request for a sizable deposit up front for a low bid. Remember, if the promise and the price sound too good to be

true, they probably are.

Once homeowners have seen all this, including proof of insurance, they should contact their local building department for information on obtaining a building permit. Many municipalities have expedited the process for emergency repairs.

If you yourself are the contractor, especially in any disaster-recovery scenario, be the first to provide all this information, whether the homeowner asks for it or not. The very best way to encourage homeowners to hire law-abiding contractors and not station-wagon bandits is for you yourself to give them good work and a good recovery/remodeling experience.

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