



GEMA



FEMA

Disaster News

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WATCH OUT FOR FRAUD

CORDELE, Ga. – In the wake of natural disasters, it is common for victims to be taken unaware by someone claiming to be an official disaster aid worker or a neighbor wanting to help complete disaster aid applications.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), along with the Georgia Emergency Management Agency (GEMA), and the Georgia Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs, cautions victims of the severe storms and tornadoes of March 1-2, 2007, to watch out for the many scams targeting them.

FEMA does not approve contractors. Check references, obtain written estimates and avoid large cash payments up front. Check with the Better Business Bureau, the Georgia Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs and other appropriate agencies.

(Editor: See additional tips at the end of the story)

"FEMA is dedicated to helping the victims of the recent storms," said Federal Coordinating Officer Michael Bolch. "During a time when so many are offering their generosity to those who have suffered, it is shameful that some would choose to take advantage of disaster victims."

Georgia residents need to be aware of some common ploys, such as phone calls from people claiming to be with FEMA. Typically, residents are asked if they have registered with FEMA for disaster assistance. If so, the caller will ask for a Social Security number and income information. The caller may then ask for a checking account number and bank routing information. This is enough information for someone to make a false claim for disaster assistance, as well as to commit identity theft.

"This is an extremely difficult time for many residents in the counties affected by the severe storms and tornadoes of March 1-2," said State Coordinating Officer Charley English. "Be careful before you sign contracts and when dealing with people representing themselves as officials. If you have doubt, contact your local law enforcement agency or obtain a complaint form from a state representative at any Disaster Recovery Center."

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FEMA instructs disaster victims to ask a caller claiming to be with the agency to give their personal identification number from their badge. If disaster victims feel uncomfortable with providing information to a caller claiming to be a FEMA representative, they should immediately call FEMA at **1-800-621-FEMA (3362)**, or **TTY 1-800-462-7585** for the speech- or hearing-impaired. Disaster victims are strongly cautioned against using non-FEMA or non-federal government Internet sites or toll-free numbers when providing personal and financial information.

Disaster victims should be leery of anyone they do not know offering to help by filling out disaster assistance documents. Residents should not give personal or financial information.

Anyone witnessing fraudulent activity should report it immediately to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General at **1-800-323-8603** or the Georgia Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs.

Tips for hiring contractors include:

- **Get a written estimate.** Compare services and prices before making a final decision. Also, read the fine print. Some contractors charge a fee for a written estimate, which is often applied to the cost of subsequent repairs they make.
- **Check references.** Contractors should be willing to provide names of previous customers. Call several former customers who had similar work done to make sure they were satisfied with the job.
- **Ask for proof of insurance.** Make sure the contractor carries general liability insurance and workers' compensation. If the contractor is not insured, the homeowner may be liable for accidents that occur on the property.
- **Use reliable, licensed contractors.** Call your local Better Business Bureau (*and other local sources*) to inquire about a business before signing a contract.
- **Insist on a written contract.** A complete contract should clearly state all tasks to be performed, all associated costs and the payment schedule. Never sign a blank contract or one with blank spaces.
- **Get guarantees in writing.** Any guarantees made by the contractor should be written into the contract. The guarantee should clearly state what is guaranteed, who is responsible for the guarantee and how long the guarantee is valid.
- **Obtain a local building permit, if required.** Permits may be required for site work, other than demolition, and for reconstruction. Contact your local government for permit information.
- **Make final payments when the work is completed.** Do not sign completion papers or make the final payment until the work is completed to your satisfaction. A reputable contractor will not threaten you or pressure you to sign if the job is not finished properly.

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- **Pay by check.** Avoid on-the-spot cash payments. The safest route is to write a check to the contracting company. A reasonable down payment is 30 percent of the total cost of the project, to be paid upon initial delivery of materials. Federal law gives consumers a three-day “cooling off” period for unsolicited door-to-door sales of more than \$25.
- **If necessary, cancel a contract in the proper manner.** This should be done within three business days of signing. Be sure to follow the procedures for cancellation that are set out in the contract. Send the notification by registered mail with a return receipt to be signed by the contractor.

FEMA manages federal response and recovery efforts following any national incident, initiates mitigation activities and manages the National Flood Insurance Program. FEMA works closely with state and local emergency managers, law enforcement personnel, firefighters and other first responders. FEMA became part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on March 1, 2003.

Disaster recovery assistance is available without regard to race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, economic status or retaliation. If you or someone you know has been discriminated against, you should call FEMA toll-free at 1-800-621-FEMA (3362) or contact your State Office of Equal rights. If suspicious of any abuse of FEMA programs, please contact the fraud hotline at 1-800-323-8603.

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