

Gas station, motel, and unscrupulous contractors under eye of consumer regulators in Maryland, Virginia, and the District

By Russ Ptacek, WUSA9. Published: July 2, 2012

BETHESDA, Md. (WUSA9) - Since Friday's storm, officials with the Maryland Attorney General's Office say they've received four complaints of unfair pricing at hotel and gas stations.

"We ask anyone who see that to file a complaint with the consumer protection division," said spokesman David Paulson. "The standard for taking legal action is very high because we do not have a specific price gouging law on the books."

Although, unlike the District and Virginia, there is no law specifically outlawing unfair disaster pricing in Maryland, officials say they will investigate businesses accused of taking advantage of storm victims.

Montgomery County Consumer Protection agents spent Monday going door-to-door warning residents affected by the storm about scams that haven't been reported yet.

"Was this somebody that knocked on your door, I'm guessing," Montgomery County's Eric Friedman asked a resident about an incident he'd had with a contractor. "That's the classic sign, they come by and knock on your door, claim to have material left over."

Bethesda resident Drew Genova said he fell victim to a contractor scam a few years ago.

"He didn't even do half the work," Genova said. "He said he had to go out to get some supplies, get something to eat."

Friedman said that is common practice in an age old scam.

"Never came back," said Genova. "He had the cash."

"If a contractor knocks on your door, that's not how you want to select a contractor," Friedman said. "Out of state license plates. They'll have trucks with nothing on them. "

A homeowner in Kensington said no sooner had a tree come down on her roof, smashing it into her home, contractors started dropping cards at her home.

Friedman said swindlers are more likely to pick smaller jobs that aren't covered by insurance.

"But, when they see this, they follow the path of the storm," Friedman said.

He advises using local crews working out of marked vehicles.

In Maryland, he says look for a state licensing number on the side of the contractor's truck. In other jurisdictions, he advises calling the licensing authorities to ensure they're registered.