

## A Consumer Guide to Home Improvement

The Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation wants consumers to understand their rights before entering into a home improvement contract and offers the following tips:

**Research your contractor.** Get references and recommendations. Check with the Board of Building Regulations and Standards to make sure the contractor is currently registered with the state. Contact the Better Business Bureau and/or Attorney General's Office to see if any complaints have been filed against the contractor.

**Get it in writing.** All home improvement contracts over \$1,000 in value must be in writing. It is a good idea to obtain a detailed contract no matter what size job is being performed.

When home improvement projects do not go smoothly, and a consumer feels his/her rights have been violated, Consumer Affairs can help in a couple of ways: the Home Improvement Contractor Arbitration Program and the Guaranty Fund. To qualify for Arbitration and the Guaranty Fund, a homeowner must have a written contract with a registered contractor for home improvements to an owner occupied, primary residence.

Arbitration is a cost effective way to resolve disputes between homeowners and registered contractors. A professional, neutral arbitrator will hear the case and make a legally binding decision, which may help consumers retrieve some of their money from a contractor in the case of wrongdoing. An arbitration application must be filed within two years of the contract date.

If a consumer wins a case in arbitration or in court and then the contractor files for bankruptcy or fails to pay, the consumer can apply to the Home Improvement Contractor Guaranty Fund for up to \$10,000 of the actual losses.

Consumers who feel they have been victim to unscrupulous contractor practices or believe their contractor is in violation of Home Improvement Contractor Law can contact the Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation Consumer Hotline toll-free at (888) 283-3757 or visit our website at [www.mass.gov/consumer](http://www.mass.gov/consumer).

## Nail Down the Details

- Insist on a written, detailed contract.
- Review the contract carefully. It should include the contractor's registration number, address, not just a PO box, the start date and expected completion date, the total to be paid and a schedule of payments, and a list of specifications and materials.
- Make sure the contractor is registered with the MA Board of Building Regulators & Standards call 617-727-3200.
- Check your contractor's references & complaint history.
- Ask for proof that your contractor has insurance that will cover your job.
- Make sure your contractor, not you, applies for and obtains building permits.
- Pay no more than one-third of the contract costs up front, unless special order materials are needed.