

2024

CONSUMER ADVOCACY ANNUAL REPORT

Office of Attorney General Andrea Joy Campbell





Consumer Advocacy Annual Report

**A Report of Consumer Complaints Received
in Calendar Year 2024**

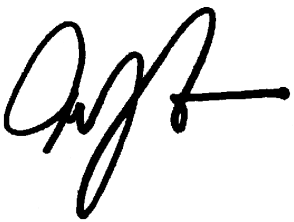
**Massachusetts Attorney General
Andrea Joy Campbell's Office**

FOREWORD FROM ATTORNEY GENERAL CAMPBELL

As we embark on National Consumer Protection Week, let us take a moment to reflect on our collective triumphs over the past year and reaffirm our commitment to protecting the people of Massachusetts from unfair, deceptive, and discriminatory business practices. We will continue to prioritize the issues that impact our most vulnerable residents - combating scams, reducing barriers to quality health care, finding innovative solutions to rising housing costs, improving access to quality and affordable housing, and dismantling predatory and unfair lending practices.

While we work towards meeting the evolving needs of the people of the Commonwealth, the Attorney General's Office will continue to be steadfast in creating economic opportunities for its residents and growing business sectors, supporting stronger consumer protections, standing against hate while promoting diversity and protecting civil rights, and ensuring safe and healthy communities for all people. We stand firm in our effort to empower the people of Massachusetts to know their rights and understand the resources that are available to them through the People's Law Firm!

I look forward to advancing this great work from a space of mutual respect, collaboration, and empathy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AJC', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Andrea Joy Campbell
Attorney General of Massachusetts



CONSUMER ADVOCACY AT THE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE

Massachusetts residents can reach out to the Attorney General's Office (AGO) for help with consumer problems. The AGO maintains a staff of dedicated professionals who provide general information and direct assistance to help consumers resolve disputes with businesses; including landlords, car dealerships, loan servicers, insurance companies and health care providers, among others.

Consumers can call our information hotlines, or file complaints seeking assistance or report an issue they want the office to be aware of using our online complaint form. Complaints are reviewed and addressed by staff working in divisions across the AGO, including the Information Services Center, Consumer Advocacy and Response Division, Insurance and Financial Services Division, Student Loan Assistance Unit, Health Care Division, Civil Rights Division, Consumer Protection Division and Manufactured Housing Unit. The AGO also works with 18 Local Consumer Programs (LCPs) that provide assistance to consumers through referrals from the AGO.

In addition to providing general information and direct assistance to try to voluntarily resolve consumer disputes, the AGO also uses the information consumers report in their complaints to inform all of the other consumer protection work we do. Because consumer complaints tell the story of our residents, they help us craft better consumer cases, policies, and education materials.

2024 BY THE NUMBERS

42,198 Consumer Hotline Calls

23,340 Consumer Complaints Received

1,168 Student Loan Complaints & Requests for Assistance Received

\$10,157,675 Saved or Recovered Through Individual Assistance

More Than \$194.3 Million in Penalties, Restitution, and Consumer Debt Relief Through Consumer Protection Litigation and Settlements.

HEALTH CARE SERVICES TOPS LIST OF COMPLAINTS

For the second year in a row, health care services topped the list as the most complained about product or service reported to the AGO in 2024. The AGO's Health Care Division received 1,402 complaints in 2024, which was a 4% increase in health care services complaints compared to 2023. Among these complaints, consumers alerted the AGO to unlicensed health insurance providers and sought assistance to resolve medical billing concerns.

Also in 2024, the AGO released a report on health care cost trends to examine the affordability of health care for families in Massachusetts and the debt families take on when they cannot pay their medical bills. The *2024 Examination of Health Care Cost Trends* report can be found [here](#)

Used Car Purchases Continue to Pose Big Risks for Consumers

Complaints about used car sales remained common. Consumers reported problems obtaining title for used vehicles and sales of defective vehicles. Problems with defective vehicles were further exacerbated by long delays in obtaining parts for auto repairs. The AGO shared tips for avoiding problems with auto repairs in last year's Consumer Advocacy Annual Report, which is available for download [here](#).

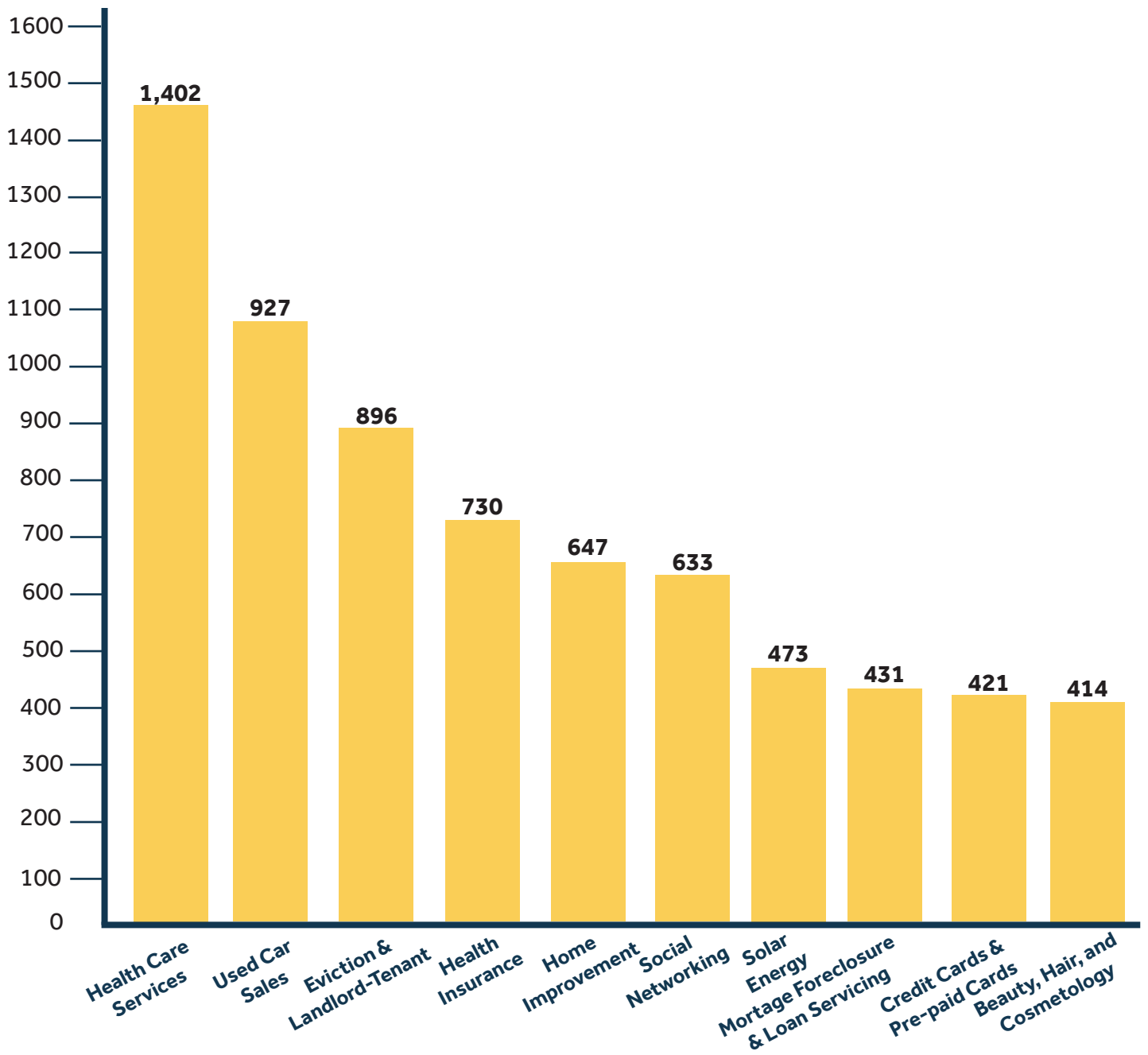
Facebook and Instagram Accounts Taken Over by Scammers

Social networking was the sixth most complained about product or service in 2024, a significant increase in complaints from 2023. The AGO received hundreds of complaints from users of social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram reporting that they lost access to their accounts and, in some cases, found scammers using their accounts to target friends and family for fraud.



2024 TOP CONSUMER COMPLAINT TRENDS

Top 10 Most Complained About Products or Services



CONSUMER ISSUE SPOTLIGHT: LANDMARK HOUSING LEGISLATION TAKES ON THE HOUSING CRISIS

As we look ahead to 2025, tenants in Massachusetts will have even greater protections to improve fair and equitable access to rental housing. As part of the Affordable Homes Act, which was signed into law in 2024, more tenants are now entitled to protections during a condo conversion and tenants will soon have the opportunity to seal eviction records.

Expanded Protections for Tenants During Condo Conversions

State law gives tenants certain rights when their landlord plans to convert their apartment into a condominium (condo):


- If your landlord plans to convert your apartment into a condo, they must tell you promptly in writing.
- After you receive written notice, you have the right to stay in your apartment for at least a full year before the landlord can ask you to leave. And, during this time, there are limits on how much your landlord can raise your rent.
- If you are elderly, have a physical disability, or have a low or moderate income (usually less than or equal to 80% of the median income in your area for a household of your size), you have the right to stay in your apartment for two years. Your landlord must help you find another apartment in your city or town at the same or a lower rent. If the landlord does not find you a suitable apartment in the first two years, you can stay in your apartment for up to two more years, or four years total.
- If you move out on time without owing rent, your landlord must pay for up to \$750 of your relocation costs, or up to \$1000 of your relocation costs if you or any member of your household is elderly, disabled, or low- or moderate-income.
- You have 90 days to purchase your apartment as a condo before your landlord is allowed to put it up for sale to the general public.

The Affordable Homes Act extends these protections during condo conversions to even more tenants. Tenants living in buildings with two or three apartments will now be protected by the state condo law, unless the landlord also lives in the building. Tenants living in buildings with four or more condos are protected no matter where the landlord lives.

Some cities and towns, like Boston, Cambridge, and Lexington, have local laws that give tenants additional protections and benefits. If your landlord is thinking about converting your apartment into a condo, you can ask your city or town for a copy of any local condo laws.

You can get more information about condominiums and state and local condo conversion laws on the MassLegalHelp website at <https://www.masslegalhelp.org/housing-apartments-shelter/rooming-houses-mobile-homes-condos/chapter-17-condominium-control>.

If you find out about a condo conversion and you did not get the required notice, extra time to move, rent protections, or other benefits that you are entitled to by law, you may wish to speak with an attorney or file a consumer complaint with the Attorney General's Office.



**Only a judge can
evict you.**

You do not need to
move out of your
home after receiving
a notice that your
lease is terminated.

EVICTIION RECORD SEALING: COMING IN MAY 2025!

For the first time, starting in May 2025, Massachusetts tenants will be able to “seal” the court records of eviction cases they were involved in. Once you seal your record, members of the public will not be able to view it either at the courthouse or on the court system’s online database, MassCourts.org. Sealed records cannot be included in credit reports, and tenants who seal their records do not need to tell prospective landlords and employers about their sealed eviction case history.

If you want your records sealed, you will need to file a “petition” (request) with the court where you had your case. The Massachusetts Trial Court will create the petition form and make it available at courthouses and on the court’s website on Mass.gov.

Not all eviction case records can be sealed, but many can. Whether and when you can seal a case depends on the kind of case and the outcome of the case.



In some cases, you can ask the court to seal your records as soon as the appeal period in your case ends. This is an option if *any* of the following is true:

- You are a tenant and you win a judgment in your favor in an eviction case
- You are a tenant and a judge or the landlord “dismisses” the case against you
- You are a tenant in a no-fault eviction case, where the landlord is not claiming that you owe rent

In other cases, you may need to wait longer or meet additional criteria before sealing your eviction case:

To find out more about eviction sealing and where to find assistance, watch this space: <https://www.masslegalhelp.org/housing-apartments-shelter/eviction-sealing/eviction-record-sealing-basics>.

You can find more information on the Affordable Homes Act on the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities website at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/the-affordable-homes-act-smart-housing-livable-communities>.

CONSUMER ISSUE SPOTLIGHT : MANUFACTURED HOUSING

Manufactured housing provides an important source of affordable housing in the Commonwealth. Because residents often own their manufactured home but rent the lot on which their home sits from manufactured housing community owners, residents and community owners face unique legal issues. Our state manufactured housing law addresses these issues and provides significant protections for residents living in manufactured housing communities.

2024 Update to the Attorney General's Guide to Manufactured Housing Community Law (the "Guide")

The AGO publishes a Guide to inform residents and owners alike about their rights and obligations. The Guide explains our manufactured housing laws in order to help residents and owners avoid common disputes, resolve those that do occur, and, when necessary, take steps to enforce their legal rights. The AGO updated the Guide in 2024 to provide additional clarifications and explanations on a range of key manufactured housing issues, including residency restrictions, community rules, and what is required when a manufactured housing community plans to close or discontinue operation.

The 2024 Update to the Guide is available to download at: <https://www.mass.gov/manufactured-housing>.



Massachusetts Appeals Court Affirms Residents' Right of First Refusal to Purchase Their Manufactured Housing Communities

State law grants residents in manufactured housing communities a right of first refusal to purchase their manufactured housing community in certain circumstances, which can ensure long-lasting affordability and housing stability. In 2024, the Massachusetts Appeals Court published two decisions that clarify the right of first refusal. See *Blackman's Point Homeowners' Ass'n, Inc. v. Call*, 103 Mass. App. Ct. 711 (2024); *Crown Communities, LLC v. Austin*, 105 Mass. App. Ct. 113 (2024). In both cases, the Appeals Court vindicated the rights of residents who fought for years to purchase their communities and relied in part on amicus briefs filed by the AGO.

“As the cost of housing continues to rise in Massachusetts, manufactured housing offers sustainable and affordable housing options for some of our most vulnerable communities, including elders and low-income individuals.”

Attorney General Campbell

CONSUMER ISSUE SPOTLIGHT: BEWARE OF DECEPTIVE LOANS

Sometimes consumers need to borrow money to make ends meet. Some companies have started offering “loan alternatives,” which provide quick cash while claiming not to be loans. Be cautious of products that allow you to borrow money that you will pay back, if the business does not want to call it a “loan.” Loans come with important consumer protections under Federal and State law. Companies that offer “loan alternatives” may claim that their loans are not loans to evade these protections. These products are usually far more expensive than normal loans.

Protect Your Home from Deceptive Loans

What is Secured Debt?

Some debts, like car loans or mortgages, are “secured” by property. This means the lender can take the home or car if the borrower can’t repay the loan. Because of this, secured loans often have lower interest rates.

Unsecured debts usually have higher interest but don’t often result in the loss of a home. Unsecured debts are also easier to discharge in bankruptcy.

Using secured debt to pay off unsecured debt can be dangerous because the borrower can lose their home if they don’t repay the loan.

Some companies target homeowners with deceptive loans, promising to help consumers pay off credit card debt or other unsecured debts. These companies secure their deceptive loan with a mortgage on the borrower’s home. This trades unsecured debt for secured debt, and allows the company to collect on its loan from a consumer’s home equity. It also makes it much harder for the borrower to get a fresh start through bankruptcy or other options to decrease debt. Consumers should be especially careful any time a company offers money to homeowners secured by a mortgage. The AGO’s Consumer Protection Division has taken action against companies that offer struggling homeowners deceptive loans and financial products that put borrowers’ homes at risk.

Better Alternatives to Deceptive Loans

Consumers who are having trouble dealing with bills or debts can seek out legitimate lenders. If the consumer owns a home, they may be able to get a Home Equity Loan or Line of Credit. If not, they may be able to qualify for a Personal Loan or Debt Consolidation Loan. Consumers who can't qualify for these loans can also consider bankruptcy, which can allow for a fresh start with manageable payments.



Consumer Protection Settlements & Judgments of 2024

January 11, 2024 – The AGO’s Insurance & Financial Services Division (“IFSD”) resolved allegations that student loan servicer Nelnet, Inc. failed to appropriately communicate with borrowers about renewing Income-Driven Repayment (“IDR”) plans that provide access to affordable payments for student loan borrowers. The settlement requires Nelnet to pay \$1.8 million to the Commonwealth, comply with federal notice requirements relating to IDR plans, and implement business practice changes that make it easier for borrowers to continue making more affordable income-driven payments.

January 12, 2024 – IFSD resolved allegations that Grubhub, Inc. illegally overcharged Massachusetts restaurants in violation of a statutory fee cap during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Under the settlement, Grubhub will pay a combined total of over \$3.5 million to impacted restaurants. Grubhub will also pay \$125,000 to the Commonwealth.

February 1, 2024 – The AGO’s Health Care Division (“HCD”) resolved its lawsuit against Publicis Health, which alleged Publicis partnered with Purdue Pharma L.P. on dozens of contracts in exchange for marketing schemes to get doctors to prescribe Purdue’s opioids to more patients, in higher doses, for longer periods of time. According to the lawsuit, the company was also instrumental in Purdue’s decision to market OxyContin to providers through patients’ electronic health records. As part of the settlement, Massachusetts received nearly \$8 million for the state’s Opioid Recovery and Remediation Fund to provide support for opioid use disorder prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction efforts throughout Massachusetts.

April 30, 2024 – IFSD resolved an investigation of Senior Life Insurance Company (SLIC) which alleged SLIC engaged in a pattern of misleading content distribution that suggested the private company was actually affiliated with a government agency. SLIC agreed to pay \$50,000 to the Commonwealth and make content and formatting changes to make clear that SLIC has no connection to any government agency or public benefits program.

May 16, 2024 – The Consumer Protection Division (“CPD”) resolved allegations that North Andover Auto School, LLC (NAAS) and its owner Michael J. Larocque violated the state Consumer Protection Act by failing to refund consumers after NAAS abruptly closed in October 2020. As part of the settlement, NAAS and Larocque will jointly make a \$300,000 payment to the Commonwealth. The monetary payment will be used to refund impacted consumers and for initiatives that promote consumer protection. Additionally, the settlement permanently bars Larocque from operating a driving school or providing any form of driver’s education in the Commonwealth.

May 22, 2024 – CPD settled an investigation of EasyPay Finance (also known as Duvera Billing Services, LLC) for alleged usurious loans that EasyPay made as part of a “rent-a-bank” scheme wherein it partnered with an out-of-state bank in an effort to circumvent the Commonwealth’s interest rate limits. The average APR on these loans was over 100%. Under the terms of the settlement, EasyPay must stop making loans in the Commonwealth, cease collection on all active and defaulted loans in the Commonwealth, and provide \$625,000 in restitution to Massachusetts consumers who paid exorbitant interest rates.

June 11, 2024 – HCD, along with 42 other Attorneys General, resolved allegations that Johnson & Johnson deceptively promoted and misled consumers in advertisements related to the safety and purity of some of its talc powder products. As part of the lawsuit, Johnson & Johnson has agreed to stop the manufacture and sale of its baby powder and body powder products that contain talc in the United States. Massachusetts is set to receive over \$14.5 million, in installments through 2027, as part of the multistate settlement.

October 3, 2024 – CPD resolved an investigation of Franklin Credit Management Corporation (“Franklin Credit”) for alleged violations of Massachusetts consumer protection laws related to the collection of alleged mortgage debts. As part of the settlement, Franklin Credit will cease collecting or attempting to collect the debts of its entire Massachusetts mortgage loan portfolio. The company also will not transfer or sell any of these loans to another entity, effectively relieving the burden of over \$10 million in debt for hundreds of Massachusetts borrowers. In addition, Franklin Credit will make a monetary payment of \$300,000 to the Commonwealth and change its business practices to comply with state laws if it seeks to service mortgages in Massachusetts in the future.

October 9, 2024 – The Privacy and Responsible Technology Division, along with forty-nine other Attorneys General, settled with Marriott International, Inc. following an investigation into a large multi-year data breach of one of the hotel’s guest reservation databases, which impacted more than 130 million guest records nationwide. Under the settlement, Marriott has agreed to strengthen its data security practices, provide certain consumer protections, and make a \$52 million payment to the states. Massachusetts received \$1.6 million from the settlement.

December 31, 2024 – HCD obtained an order against three UnitedHealth insurance companies, HealthMarkets, Inc. and its subsidiaries, The Chesapeake Life Insurance Company, and HealthMarkets Insurance Agency, Inc. f/k/a Insphere Insurance Solutions, Inc., requiring them to pay over \$50 million in restitution for Massachusetts consumers and over \$115 million in civil penalties to the Commonwealth for engaging in widespread misrepresentations, including misleading consumers into buying unnecessary health insurance products and, in some instances, violating a prior consent judgment meant to protect consumers. The Court’s order is believed to impose the largest total civil penalty in an action brought by the Attorney General’s Office under the Massachusetts Consumer Protection Act.

CONSUMER RESOURCES

The AGO encourages consumers who have concerns with a business, whether it be a health care provider, a landlord, a repair shop, a store, an energy company, an insurance company, or a debt collector to:

- Call the AGO's Consumer Hotline: 617-727-8400
- File a Complaint Online at: www.mass.gov/how-to/file-a-consumer-complaint
- Mail a complaint form to:
Office of the Attorney General
Consumer Advocacy and Response Division
One Ashburton Place, 18th Floor
Boston, MA 02108

Attorney General's Elder Hotline

Call the Elder Hotline at (888) AG-ELDER or (888) 243-5337.

The Elder Hotline is open Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The hotline is staffed by volunteers who can help you find answers to questions and assist with consumer issues relevant to seniors.

Health Care Helpline

Call the Healthcare Helpline at (888) 830-6277 Monday through Friday, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm.

Student Loan Assistance Unit

To get help, please submit a Student Loan Help Request at mass.gov/service-details/student-loan-assistance.

If you have questions, please call the Student Loan Helpline at (888) 830-6277.