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Unlicensed Operators Hit a Dead End in Fort Bragg

CSLB undercover operation nets 13 for unlicensed contracting

SACRAMENTO - A make-shift sign announcing "DANGER! POLICE STING AT END OF ROAD!" didn't stop illegal bids for home improvement at a sting house set up at the end of a short Fort Bragg alley on August 18, 2010. Investigators from the Contractors State License Board's (CSLB) Statewide Investigative Fraud Team (SWIFT) partnered with the Mendocino County District Attorney and the California Department of Insurance for an undercover operation where SWIFT investigators posed as homeowners and solicited bids for home improvement projects that included painting and fencing.

Thirteen people who bid more than \$500 for labor and materials received notices to appear (NTA) in court for contracting without a license. It is illegal to contract for home improvement projects valued greater than \$500 without a contractor license. Eleven of the thirteen will face an additional charge of illegal advertising.

California law requires contractors to include their license number in all advertisements. Those without licenses can advertise to do home improvement jobs valued at less than \$500, provided that their ads state that they are not licensed. One of the eleven will also be charged with soliciting an excessive down payment. By law, contractors may ask for up to \$1,000 or 10 percent of the contract price as a down payment, whichever is less. There is an exception for about two dozen licensees who purchase special consumer protection bonds.

Two unlicensed operators have had prior contact with CSLB (the scrap wood sign hand-painted with the sting warning proved insufficient). Debra Deann Evans, 40, of Fort Bragg, received an NTA for unlicensed contracting in 2008. Brian Thomas Himan, 59, of Fort Bragg, received an administrative citation for unlicensed contracting last month. Another suspect who had been cited by CSLB twice before called to cancel his bid appointment, and told undercover investigator to "say hello" to the investigator who had caught him in two previous stings. That suspect is still expected to receive an administrative citation for illegal advertising.

"This sting should put unlicensed operators on notice," said CSLB Registrar Steve Sands. "The Board is serious about protecting consumers and leveling the playing field for licensees who play by the rules."

Licensed contractors are required to purchase a \$12,500 bond for consumer protection and workers' compensation insurance for all of their employees. Roofing contractors must purchase the workers' comp coverage for themselves even if they have no employees. Unlicensed operators do not have bonds or insurance; if a worker is hurt on the homeowner's property or the project is abandoned or poorly done, the consumer is potentially liable and left without recourse.

CSLB provides many helpful consumer publications that can be downloaded or ordered from

www.CheckTheLicenseFirst.com or www.cslb.ca.gov, or by calling, toll-free: 1-800-321-CSLB (2752). CSLB urges consumers to remember the following tips when hiring a contractor:

- Be especially hesitant when approached by someone offering home improvement services door-to-door.
- Verify the contractor's license by checking online at www.cslb.ca.gov, or via CSLB's automated phone system at 1-800-321-CSLB (2752).
- Ask to see a photo identification to make sure you're dealing with the correct person.
- Don't pay more than 10% down or \$1,000, whichever is less. There is an exception to this for about two dozen contractors who have special bonds for consumer protection that are noted on the CSLB website.
- Don't pay in cash, and don't let the payments get ahead of the work.
- Check references, and get at least three bids and a written contract before your project begins.

The following suspects are scheduled for arraignment in the Mendocino County Superior Court at 700 South Franklin Street in Fort Bragg on October 5, 2010 at 9:00 a.m.:

SUSPECT=S NAME AND CITY	AGE	WORK CLASS	VIOLATIONS
William Blake Wahlquist Fort Bragg	48	Painting	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising
Roger J. Bowles Fort Bragg	63	Painting	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising
Carl Cipton Casey Fort Bragg	73	Fencing	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising
Robert Alme McGraw Willits	59	Fencing	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising
Alan Daniel Rexrode Fort Bragg	41	Fencing	Contracting without a license
James Braithwaite Fort Bragg	51	Fencing	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising
Jesse Emmanuel Heckenlaible Fort Bragg	62	Painting	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising
Eric John Hill Fort Bragg	25	General Construction	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising
Dean Leslie Price Fort Bragg	51	Painting	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising, soliciting excessive down payment

Jeffrey Hock Fort Bragg	56	Fencing	Contracting without a license
Alejandro Bermudez Garcia Fort Bragg	30	Painting	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising
Brian Thomas Himan Fort Bragg	59	General Construction	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising
Debra Deann Evans Fort Bragg	40	Painting	Contracting without a license, illegal advertising

The Contractors State License Board operates under the umbrella of the California Department of Consumer Affairs. More information and publications about hiring contractors are available on the CSLB website or by calling 800-321-CSLB (2752). You can also sign up for CSLB e-mail alerts at www.cslb.ca.gov. CSLB licenses and regulates California's more than 300,000 contractors, and is regarded as one of the leading consumer protection agencies in the United States. In fiscal year 2009-10, CSLB helped recover nearly \$42 million in ordered restitution for consumers.

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