

Consumer Affairs: It Works For You

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The bottom line for any governmental agency is: What is it doing for the taxpayer?

The Consumer Affairs Department of the Santa Cruz County District Attorney's office is doing a great deal.

In 1981, money returned to local consumers as a result of the consumer advocate and voluntary arbitration programs amounted to \$57,120.65.

Gloria Lorenzo, who, with Robin McFarland, coordinates the program, says their office is having an open house Monday in celebration of its 10th anniversary. The public is invited to come to the office, Room 240 in the County Government Center, between 2 and 4 p.m. to learn more about what the agency can do for them and also to pick up, free of charge, the many consumer advice booklets they have on hand.

In recognition of the anniversary, the County Board of Supervisors proclaims January 25 as Consumer Affairs Day.

The Consumer Affairs office is two-pronged.

It listens to consumer complaints and does something about them — and it has a group of volunteer arbiters who have been trained to settle minor disputes between individuals.

And something else.

The office maintains an educational service, offering free booklets and pamphlets on subjects ranging from guides to car buying to mobile home buying to warnings about various types of fraud.

Gloria gives an example of a successfully handled fraud case — one that sent the defendants to jail.

"In January, 1981," she says, "our office was getting complaints from people — many of them senior citizens — who had answered an ad for reupholstery work.

"It was a local company, with a local number, and they offered inexpensive labor. The people had paid in advance to have the work done — but when there was no delivery, they wanted their money back.

"When they later called the number, they got an answering service for a company located in San Jose — and finally, the answering service told them it wasn't taking messages for that company any more.

"I knew the company, because of prior complaints that had mostly been satisfactorily resolved — but only because of our office's constant follow-ups.

"Among my contact people was an investigator for the Santa Clara County Consumer Affairs Office, Virginia Castille. On her own time she went to the place of business, trying to locate them. But they weren't there — they had disappeared.

"Through social contacts she found them. By this time, we were coordinating information and complaints for the State Bureau of Home Furnishings, the Monterey and Alameda Counties Consumer Affairs Offices, and the Sacramento Consumer Affairs and District Attorney's office.

"The same people had been advertising in these areas, too."

I asked Gloria how they got away with all this. Her answer: "In reviewing my files, I found they had changed their name and location about eight times in four years — that's how they got away with it!

"I referred it to criminal prosecution as well as consumer fraud, and with the cooperation of our County Sheriff's office, Santa Cruz City police and law enforcement agencies in other counties, the two men were arrested and charged with grand theft.

"They were sent to the county jail for six months, had to pay restitution to the victims, and were put on five year probation. I recommended that in addition, they not be allowed to work in the furniture industry for five years and that was included.

"It was the first felony consumer fraud case in Santa Cruz County history — and I never realized how much sheer effort went into a criminal investigation!"

What is the single most repeated consumer complaint?

Discourtesy of business people — clerks, managers — Gloria says.

"If business people would extend more courtesy; would take more time with customers, it would de-fuse the complaint and probably solve the problem," she says.

Gloria has some sound advice for local persons who have been affected by the recent flood disaster.

"After a disaster," she says, "when you have lost everything from personal property to belongings, and are trying to use best what money you have, you might be prey to anyone who offers you a bargain.

"This is a time to keep your guard up higher than ever. Go a little slower in making decisions. You are under emotional and physical stress. Don't add to it by adding more financial stress by hiring a fly-by-night operator.

"These would include people who offer 'too good' prices for labor and/or materials to fix a roof, remodel a room, patch a driveway, trim trees."

The Mediation/Arbitration program, in its fourth year, settles consumer, merchant and neighborhood disputes.

"About 60 percent are resolved by mutual agreement and the rest by arbitrators' award," Gloria says. "The neighborhood dispute cases resolved through this program save the county an estimated \$1400 per day of court and prosecution costs."



Gloria Lorenzo has this advice for flood victims: "After a disaster, when you have lost everything from personal property to belongings — you might be prey to anyone who offers you a bargain. This is a time to keep your guard up — you are under emotional and physical stress. Don't add more financial stress by hiring a fly-by-night operator — who offers 'too-good' prices for labor and/or materials."

David Lee of Soquel wants to buy a car, and he's looking at a consumer advice booklet on the subject, provided by Gloria Lorenzo of the Consumer Affairs office.