**Op-Ed: Unlicensed Contractors Are Risky Business**

Jerry Linder

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Our homes are a substantial investment. Most homeowners go to great lengths before they ever sign on the dotted line. They save money, research comparable prices and floor plans, and identify preferable school and work zones.

If so much prep work is involved in building a new home or purchasing a fixer-upper, why would anyone risk doing business with an unlicensed contractor?

As a licensed contractor myself, I understand the anxiety that can accompany deadlines surrounding construction or remodel projects. However, whatever the scenario, whether it’s not knowing where to start or being hurried, hiring an unlicensed contractor may provide a quick fix but will always result in serious and lasting consequences to your wallet and property.

[Tallahassee Op Ed]

Just last week, the Tallahassee Democrat reported a man posing as a contractor who scammed $50,000 for home repairs. He, along with other violators, target uniformed and rushed homeowners.

[Sarasota Op Ed]

Earlier this month, the Sarasota Sherriff’s office published a press release stating that seven people were arrested on multiple charges during an investigation to protect citizens from unlicensed contractors.

[Miami Op Ed]

Earlier this month, Local 10 News reported over 12 people were netted in a two-day undercover operation targeting unlicensed contractors who preyed on uniformed and rushed homeowners.

According to the Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR), the agency that licenses and regulates businesses and professionals in the State of Florida, just last year over 2,100 legal actions were taken against unlicensed subjects, including contractors.

The Florida Home Builders Association (FHBA) understands how important it is to be a licensed contractor and how large a threat unlicensed activity is among unsuspecting homeowners. Every year the FHBA, representing 7,500 builders and trade partners in Florida, requests the state to fully fund DBPR enforcement actions against unlicensed contractors.

DBPR uses the FHBA-advocated funds to partner with local law enforcement and area builder/industry associations to increase “stings” and “sweeps” – undercover investigations that expose unlicensed groups in communities. [Sarasota Op-ed: Specifically, Sarasota and Manatee counties have developed a Code Enforcement Division that has, over the past 18 months, issued over 140 citations for unlicensed and unpermitted activities.] Counties have also adopted ordinances to impose fines against violators.

But, state agencies and local organizations can only do so much to prevent the risk and danger of unlicensed contractor activity. You, as a homeowner, must be educated and cautious when contracting for home improvements or repair. Here are some tips on how to protect your investment:

* Ask to see a state-issued license. An occupational license does not qualify as a contractor.
* Beware of contractors who claim to be the cheapest, solicit door-to-door, or give a post office box instead of a street address.
* Avoid paying cash or full payment in advance.
* Avoid any contractor who tries to convince you to personally obtain building permits or that building permits are not necessary for the project.
* Do not sign-off on work that is not completed or according to your contract.

When offering a bid on a project, I always encourage my potential clients to contact my referrals and ask them questions. Here are a few that I suggest:

* Were you satisfied with the work and was it completed on time?
* Did the workers show up on time and clean up when finished?
* Were you surprised with any unexpected costs or problems that occurred?
* Would you recommend the contractor or use him/her again?

Perhaps the largest risk homeowners face is when they knowingly hire an unlicensed contractor. It is illegal. Aside from the inability to sue the contractor or receive recovery funds should there be a breach of contract, DBPR can stop construction and impose a $5,000 fine to the homeowner. Additionally, homeowners may be liable to pay unpaid subcontractors and any potential on-the-job injuries.

There is never a good reason to hire an unlicensed contractor. The risk has no reward.

Take the same time and care into finding a licensed and trustworthy contractor as you did in purchasing your home. Protect your investment and your wallet. Use a licensed contractor.

To verify a license or file a complaint, call DBPR at 866.532.1440 or go to [www.MyFloridaLicense.com](http://www.MyFloridaLicense.com). To learn more on what your local builder/industry association is doing to expose unlicensed contractor activity, call FHBA at 800.261.9447 or go to [www.fhba.com](http://www.fhba.com).

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