

Don't be Bullied by Door-to-Door Pine Straw Scams!

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Better Business Bureau (BBB) is again noticing an increase in calls related to door-to-door pine straw schemes, particularly targeting elderly homeowners. Consumers report aggressive tactics by disreputable landscapers who show up at their doors, claiming to have leftover pine straw or mulch from a previous job. The “landscaper” is willing to offer it to the unsuspecting homeowner at a heavily discounted rate.

Once the homeowner agrees to a price or number of bales, the scammer will either lay down fewer bales than agreed and then need more money to sufficiently cover the area; or completely cover the area and insist that the consumer pay the extra costs. If the consumer refuses, the scammer will then resort to intimidation tactics to frighten the homeowner into paying more. One elderly consumer agreed to pay \$400 for their yard, but when the workers were finished, they demanded \$1,200, or else. In the end, the consumer was bullied into paying the exorbitant fee.

Many door-to-door salespeople are legitimate, but others might only be looking to make a sale and then, move on. BBB recommends consumers be suspicious of too good to be true offers and to have a plan in place when hearing that tell-tale knock:

- **Ask about licensing.** Many cities require door-to-door salespeople to have a peddler or solicitor license. Ask if the salesperson has checked in with the city and gotten proper licensing. Not sure? Call the city or county offices to verify.
- **Check identification.** A reputable seller will provide all the information asked of them, including a photo ID and a business card. If possible, use your phone to take a photo of their vehicle and tag.
- **Verify the individual and the company.** A reputable salesperson should not have a problem with having their identity checked with a quick phone call to the company. Research the company and contact them to check if the salesperson is in fact an employee. Read the company's Business Profile and customer reviews at BBB.org.
- **Get promises in writing.** If you are interested in a product or service, get everything in writing including price, contract details and all other terms and conditions. Tell the salesperson the proposal will be reviewed, and a decision will be made. Verify the physical address and valid contact information for the company are included.
- **Don't give in to pressure.** Watch out for high-pressure sales tactics and be aware that anything you sign could construe a contract. If you feel pressured, end the sales pitch and ask the person to leave. Be prepared to call the police if they refuse.
- **Know your rights.** The [Federal Trade Commission's](https://www.ftc.gov) [Three-Day Cooling-Off](https://www.ftc.gov/consumer/3-day-cooling-off)

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Rule gives the customer three days to cancel purchases over \$25 that are made in their home or at a location that is not the seller's permanent place of business. Along with a receipt, salespeople should also include a completed cancellation form that customers can send to the company to cancel the agreement.

- **Stand strong.** Be careful about allowing strangers into your home. If you do allow a salesperson inside your home and decide during the presentation that you are not interested in making a purchase, simply ask them to leave. If the salesperson refuses to leave, tell them you will call the police – and follow through if they do not leave immediately.

Consumers who have issues with door-to-door solicitors can submit a BBB Scam Tracker report at BBB.org, as well as reporting anyone suspicious to local law enforcement.

Kelvin Collins is president & CEO of the Better Business Bureau serving the Fall Line Corridor, serving 77 counties in East Alabama, West Georgia, Southwest Georgia, Central Georgia, East Georgia, and Western South Carolina. This tips column is provided through the local BBB and the International Association of Better Business Bureaus (IABBB). The Better Business Bureau sets standards for ethical business behavior, monitors compliance and helps consumers identify trustworthy businesses. Questions or complaints about a specific company or charity should be referred directly to the BBB at Phone: 1-800-763- 4222, Web site: BBB.org or E-mail: info@centralgeorgia.bbb.org.