



# AFTER THE DISASTER

Fires, floods, earthquakes, and other disasters are common in Southern California. After a disaster, it might be difficult to know who is there to help and who might want to take advantage of the situation. Consider the following tips to avoid being taken advantage of.



## PRICE GOUGING

If the government (e.g. President, Governor, mayor, County Board of Supervisors) declares an emergency, it may be a crime to increase prices of food, repairs, construction, housing, emergency and medical supplies, and gasoline by more than 10% in the disaster area. If you believe a business is breaking the law, keep receipts and report it to DCBA online at **[stoppricegouging.dcba.lacounty.gov](http://stoppricegouging.dcba.lacounty.gov)** or call **(800) 593-8222**.

## PHONY "DISASTER OFFICIALS"

Crooks might show up after a disaster and claim to be from a government agency. They pressure you to pay for expensive, unneeded repairs. They may also claim to be brokers, and if you pay a "processing fee," they will get you a check from FEMA or other government agencies. Real disaster officials carry proper identification. If someone claims to be one, ask to see their ID. Call your local police department to report phony "government officials."

## PUBLIC INSURANCE ADJUSTERS

Public insurance adjusters do not work for your insurance company but you can hire them to help you negotiate a settlement with your insurance company. They usually charge a fee of 10% of the insurance claim proceeds you receive. If you choose to hire one, select the right one. They must be licensed by the California Department of Insurance and have a bond. Check their references and ask about their work experience. For more information, contact the California Department of Insurance at **(800) 927-4357** or check their online database at **[insurance.ca.gov](http://insurance.ca.gov)**.

## MOVING COMPANIES

Moving companies must be licensed by the California Bureau of Household Goods and Services. Before you hire a moving company, visit **[bhgs.dca.ca.gov](http://bhgs.dca.ca.gov)** or call **(916) 999-2041** to check whether the company has a valid license, or if people have complained against them.

**Los Angeles County Department  
of Consumer and Business Affairs**

320 W. Temple Street, Suite G-10  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

If calling from outside Los Angeles County:  
(213) 974-1452



**County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors**

Hilda L. Solis, First District  
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DCBA Director: Rafael Carbajal

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## CONTRACTORS AND REPAIRS

Contractors in California must be licensed if they charge you \$500 or more for repairs. Contact the Contractors State License Board at **(800) 321-2752** or **www.cslb.ca.gov** to find out if a contractor has a valid license, or if people have complained against them.

After a disaster, do not be rushed or pushed into signing a contract for repairs. Before you choose a contractor, get several bids, and make sure all verbal promises are in the written contract, including materials to be used, costs, and the completion dates.

If the total cost for materials and labor is \$500 or more, the contractor can charge you a down payment of only \$1,000 or 10% of the total cost, whichever is lowest. Do not make the final payment until the contractor completes the work, pays his workers, and the city inspectors approve the work.

## BOGUS CHARITIES

Beware of telemarketers, door-to-door salespeople, and junk e-mails asking for donations to bogus disaster charities. Many bogus charities use names that sound like the real ones. Give only to charities you know. Avoid people who will not give you their name, phone number, or written materials. Never give money to people sent to your home to pick up cash. Be also suspicious of out-of-state groups, especially if their only address is a P.O. Box. Contact the Attorney General's Office Charity Registration at **(800) 952-5225** or **oag.ca.gov/charities** to see if a charity is real.

## DOOR-TO-DOOR SALES

If a person sells you something at your home for \$25 or more, you have the right to cancel the contract within three days and get a full refund. The salesperson must tell you of your 3-day right to cancel and give you a cancellation form. You can cancel for any reason, but you must do it in writing.

## ADVANCE-FEE LOANS

Following a disaster, you might need a quick loan to rebuild your home or business. Don't be tempted by offers of "guaranteed" loans that require costly advance fees in order to get them. If you use one of these companies, you may never get a loan or see your money again. Protect yourself. Deal only with licensed lenders. Following a disaster, you may be entitled to get a loan from the U.S. Small Business Administration. For more information, contact **(800) 827-5722** or **www.sba.gov**.

## RENTAL LISTING COMPANIES

The California Department of Real Estate must license companies that charge you in advance to find you a place to live. Contact them at **(877) 373-4542** or **www.dre.ca.gov** to check whether a company has a valid license, or find out if people have complained against them. Be aware that many companies charge for rental listings that are old or don't exist. The company must give you a written contract. Read and understand the contract before you sign it.

## WATER TESTING SCAMS

Bogus firms may try to get you to buy expensive, useless water filters. They offer to test your water for free and claim your water is bad. Contact your water company or the County Environmental Health Department to find out if your water is bad. The water company's number is on their monthly bill. Contact the L.A. County Department of Environmental Health at **(888) 700-9995** or **lapublichealth.org/eh**.

## LANDLORDS AND TENANTS

If you rent a home or an apartment and your place is severely damaged in a disaster, you can move out right away. You do not have to give your landlord advance notice, and you have the right to get back your security deposit and last month's rent. Your landlord has to send you this money within three weeks after you move out. For help, contact DCBA.