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# Home Sweet Home Improvements

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## A Consumer Guide

DOCUMENTS

**Executive Office of Consumer Affairs  
and Business Regulation  
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Boston, MA 02108**

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# Before you start...

Your home is probably your most expensive investment. Before you spend thousands of dollars on renovations, you need to do your homework and understand your rights under the law.

This brochure will suggest some of the steps in planning for your home improvement, how to select a contractor, and what to do if you run into a problem with your contractor.

The first step is to *plan*:

- Think about the specific design you want (consult an architect or designer if necessary), and decide on a budget.
- Think about the materials you want to use -- go to home improvement centers, look at magazines featuring distinctive home designs, see what friends have done, etc.
- Clearly define the job you want done in a specification sheet and floor plan you can give to potential contractors. (When all contractors who bid on your job work from the same design description, you are more likely to get complete and accurate bids that can be compared.)

# Before you panic...

Unfortunately, sometimes homeowners have a major problem with their contractor. If that happens, try to rationally work out the issues. When that is not possible, outside help is available.

If you hired a **registered contractor**, you may be eligible for a hearing under the **Home Improvement Arbitration Program**. A neutral arbitrator will listen to both sides of the dispute and render a decision. Compensation or repairs may be awarded.

For claims under \$2,000, **small claims court** is recommended over arbitration. For claims over \$10,000, while arbitration is available, a lawsuit may be preferable. Before taking any action, you can always file a complaint with the Attorney General, where your complaint will be mediated.

If you win your case in arbitration or court, and the contractor fails to pay the judgment, you can apply to the **Home Improvement Guaranty Fund** for up to \$10,000 of your actual losses. Claims must be filed within **six months** of your original decision, and are paid only after reasonable steps to collect the judgment have failed. Some court action is required.

# Before you pick...

Picking the right contractor for your job is the most important part of the home renovation process.

Here are some tips to help choose the right contractor for your project:

**Interview at least three contractors** and ask them to submit firm, written **estimates**.

Check with the Board of Building Regulations and Standards to **be sure the contractor or his or her firm is currently registered** with the state. (Only registered contractors are allowed by law to perform most home improvements.)

**Get and check out references** for each contractor. Go to look at the jobs the contractor has done, if possible. Your idea of a good job may be far different from that homeowner's opinion of what is "good." Contact each homeowner for whom the contractor is currently working to learn their level of satisfaction or the existence of any current problems.

**Check the contractor's complaint history** with the Attorney General's Office, the Better Business Bureau, and the Board of Building Regs. & Standards.

# Before you sign...

One of the best ways to protect yourself and to help assure that you and the contractor have the same understanding as to the scope of the job and the price, is to have a detailed, written contract. Though it is always a good idea to have a written contract, state law *requires* home repair contracts over \$1,000 to be in writing.

Be sure the contract contains:

- the total price of the work;
- the payment schedule;
- a provision for changes or "extras";
- detailed list of specifications/materials;
- starting and completion dates;
- a copy of the contractor's insurances;
- other details particular to your job.

It is always a good idea to **seek professional help** of a lawyer when reviewing contracts. Also, evaluate financing options.

By law, the contractor cannot collect more than one-third of the contract in advance, unless special order materials are needed. **Limit deposits** to avoid potential scams.

**Be sure the contractor obtains the building permit.** If you get it, you will **not** be eligible for the state Guaranty Fund.

# Sources of Help

## To check on a contractor's registration:

Home Improvement Contractor Program  
Board of Building Regulations and Standards  
1 Ashburton Place  
Boston, Massachusetts 02108  
(617) 727-8598

## To check a contractor's complaint history or to file a consumer complaint:

Attorney General	(617) 727-8400
Better Business Bureau	(617) 426-9000
(508) 755-2548	(413) 734-3114
Board of Building Regs.	(617) 727-8598

## To obtain applications for arbitration or the Guaranty Fund, or a booklet about the law:

Executive Office of Consumer Affairs & Bus. Reg.  
1 Ashburton Place  
Boston, Massachusetts 02108  
(617) 727-7780  
E-mail: [ask@consumer.com](mailto:ask@consumer.com)  
Internet: <http://www.consumer.com/consumer>

## For a list of member contractors:

National Association of the Remodeling Industry  
Eastern Mass. Division (800)464-NARI  
Western Mass. Division (413) 747-3172  
Builders Assn. of Greater Boston (617) 773-1300  
Home Builders Assn. of Mass. (800) 632-8168

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