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Locksmith complaints are on the rise

Published on April 26, 2010

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Imagine your front door lock has been working improperly and you finally decide to get it repaired. You Locksmiths are required scan the phone book and find a company that appears to be licensed in 14 states: Alabama, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana,

They give you a reasonable estimate, but after completing the job, the two technicians who arrived in an unmarked car present you with a bill for many times the quoted price and demand cash payment.

It may sound outrageous, but that's exactly what Laura Gold of West Newton, Mass., says happened to her.

It's similar to scams that have befallen consumers across the nation, according to numerous lawsuits, news reports and warnings published by government agencies and trade associations.

Related Story Undercover reporting sting stages a lockout >>

Maryland, Nebraska, Nevada,

Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and

New Jersey, North Carolina,

Gold says she was duped by a company called Dependable Locks after deciding to hire a locksmith to fix a malfunctioning lock on the front door of her home. She called what appeared to be a local listing in her phone book and received a \$150 estimate.

What Gold didn't know was she had been routed to the call center of Clearwater, Fla.-based Dependable, which is now the subject of a federal case as well as multiple complaints filed by state attorneys general.

Gold says she was shocked when the two technicians who made the call presented her with a bill for \$580.

"They said, 'we need cash' and of course all these bells are going off in my head,"" she says, but she felt like she had no choice but to drive to an ATM with her teenage daughter and fork over the money.

"I felt mostly a little embarrassed because I'd fallen for it," Gold says.

Throughout the U.S.

In November 2009, two owners of Dependable were charged with allegedly using coercive and intimidating tactics to strong-arm customers into paying exorbitant fees for locksmith services from its network of technicians around the country.

Moshe Aharoni, 29, and David Peer, 32, were arrested after authorities raided their Clearwater call center.

The two were charged with mail and wire fraud, engaging in financial activities to promote unlawful





Dependable Locks owners Moshe Aharoni (left) and David Peer are the subject of a federal case. Photos courtesy of Pinellas County (Fla.) Sheriff's Department



The business of legitimate locksmiths is hurt by scammers who take



2010 WINNER

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TERMS OF USE PRIVACY POLICY activities and conspiracy to recruit and employ foreign nationals not authorized to work in the U.S., charges that each carry a maximum sentence of 5 years in prison and fines up to \$250,000. They are out on bail.

advantage of consumers in emergency lockout situations, industry experts say. Photo by Jay Madden

An affidavit supporting the complaint alleges Dependable managed a national network of more than 100 locksmith technicians and that many of them were non-immigrant Israeli citizens whose visas did not permit them to do this kind of work.

"This reaches throughout the United States," said Doug Smith with the U.S. Postal Inspection Service at the time of the raid.

The federal complaint alleges that customers calling for locksmith services were routed to the Florida center, where they'd receive a price quote and get a local technician dispatched. Responding locksmiths allegedly would charge a much higher rate and were instructed to use various tactics with customers who balked at the price.

"Technicians use techniques such as accusing the consumer who objects to the overcharge of 'theft of services,' threatening to call the police, withholding the customer's keys or driver's license or following the customer to an ATM machine to ensure payment," according to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Eastern Missouri, where the case is being prosecuted.

Representatives from the U.S. Postal Inspector's Service and the U.S. Attorney's Office declined to comment on the pending case. As of press time, no trial date had been set.

This year, Dependable made the ranks of <u>Angie's List's top 10 worst contractors</u> of the year. Attorneys general in Arizona, Massachusetts and Missouri have filed suit against the company, and complaints filed in the last year against other locksmith companies in Colorado, North Carolina and Wisconsin suggest the problem is widespread and ongoing.

An Angie's List investigation of suits against Dependable, BBB and our own records uncovered more than 500 consumer complaints against the company or its aliases in at least a dozen cities.

Several other people besides Aharoni and Peer were named as part of the suits against the company. Dependable rates a D on Angie's List based on reports in seven cities, including one filed by member John Brogan.

John and his wife Patricia hired a locksmith they found on the Internet to fix a lever-style exterior door lock on their Minneapolis home. He says Patricia was immediately concerned about whether the locksmith knew what he was doing.

"He didn't seem to have the right tools, and he didn't seem to know what was going on," says Brogan, who joined Angie's List after the experience. "He gave my wife a totally skeevy vibe."

They were surprised to find the company printed on the \$120 receipt was Dependable Locks of Florida. "We thought that was weird because we had called a local number," Brogan says. Three days later, the lock mechanism fell off and the couple had to replace it.

Shoddy work

Mike Bronzell, an Oak Lawn, Ill.-based locksmith, says shoddy work is a trademark of scammers.

"They will book every job, whether they can handle it or not, and string people along with stories," says Bronzell, who runs a mobile service called All Hour Locksmith in the Chicago area and was once a subject of a lawsuit by Dependable for speaking out against the company's practices. Claims against Bronzell were later dismissed from the lawsuit.

"They're destroying our reputations and they're not even locksmiths," he adds. Messages left for Dependable's attorney were not returned.

Attorneys general with locksmith complaints pending declined to talk about their cases, but Colorado

Dependable Locks filed a lawsuit against Chicago-area locksmith Mike Bronzell after he publicly criticized their business practices, but the charges against him were later dismissed.

Photo by Jay Madden

Attorney General John Suthers reached a settlement with a company called Basad Inc. in June 2009.

In January 2009, Suthers filed a lawsuit against the Englewood, Colo.-based Basad, alleging it misrepresented the price of their service charges, failed to honor their advertised "20-minute response time" and led customers to believe they had local offices when they only had one

address.

The complaint says Basad registered 73 trade names and advertised in several states, though all calls were routed through a center in Englewood.

They also claimed to be licensed, though locksmiths were not required to be licensed in the states they operated in, according to the complaint.

Suthers reached a \$100,000 settlement with Basad that will be used to reimburse consumers who filed complaints.

The settlement also requires the company to disclose during the initial sales call that there will be additional charges and record those calls for a year. Basad did not admit any liability as part of the settlement.

A person who answered Basad's phone declined to comment and a message was not returned.

Mike Saccone, a spokesman for Suthers, says the number of locksmith complaints his office receives has declined since the settlement was reached.

"We have the occasional, sporadic complaint, but not in the volume we had with Basad," Saccone says.

'Robbed twice'

Complaints may be down in Colorado, but locksmiths and others who track the scams say the cases against Basad and Dependable are only the tip of the iceberg and consumers across the country are still encountering the same scams.

Firefighter David Rossi found a locksmith online to replace three locks when his Woodbridge, Va., home was burglarized. He says the dispatcher at Dale City Emergency Locksmith led him to believe the cost would be around \$250, so he was shocked when he was presented with a bill for more than \$1,000.

"After looking into it, that's not a normal price for changing locks, even in the middle of the night in an emergency," Rossi says. "It felt like I'd been robbed twice."

David Rossi was charged more than \$1,000 to change three locks on his Woodbridge, Va., home after a break-in. Rossi says he'd been given a \$250 estimate for the job. Photo by Katherine Klegin

Rossi says he found a restaurant at the address where he believed the locksmith was located and was given the runaround when he called and tried to file a complaint with Dale City Emergency Locksmith, whose number was routed to a company called USA Locksmith.

Representatives at USA Locksmith referred calls from *Angie's List Magazine* to a general manager who was not available by phone and provided an e-mail address that was not in service. Messages were not returned.

There are F reports on Angie's List for companies called USA Locksmith and USA Locksmiths in five states. The Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation, which licenses locksmiths, has filed a complaint against USA Locksmith alleging they employ unlicensed technicians, use false addresses and overcharge consumers.

Misleading listings

Many locksmiths interviewed for this story say Internet search engines and phone books are part of the problem because scammers create misleading listings that make it appear like they are local businesses.

"If you happen to pick the wrong name and the wrong number, you're in trouble," says Roland Malone, owner of highly rated <u>Scottsdale Lock</u> in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Malone says scammers have created online listings using the name of his 35-year-old business with a number for an out-of-state call center. His company has had to respond to dissatisfied customers who called that number, thinking it was him.

Malone says he wishes law enforcement and Internet search companies would crack down on these scammers. "They're mean, ugly and ruthless and will sell their mother for a nickel and want change," he says.

Elaine Filadelfo, a spokeswoman for Google, acknowledges that some bogus listings wind up in local search results, but she encourages users to report faulty listings.

Tim McMullen, the legislative manager of the national trade group Associated Locksmiths of

America, says his organization also has been working with Internet search companies like Google and phone book firms to ensure scammers are weeded out and legitimate locksmiths are easier to identify.

Protect yourself

There are a lot of ways consumers can protect themselves from shady operators. Don't wait until an emergency arises to pick a locksmith.

"If you're stuck in a rainstorm in the parking lot of Walmart at three in the morning, you're going to Google or call 411," says Larry Friberg, a retired police officer who runs a website that tracks scams called <u>Legallocksmiths.com</u>. "You're going to get a scammer."

Joe Weiss of the A-rated <u>Larry the Locksmith</u> in Bronx, N.Y., recommends calling several local companies. "If they're all in the same price range, it's probably pretty accurate," says Weiss, who is a registered locksmith with New York City's Department of Consumer Affairs.

He says customers should expect to pay more if they need service in the middle of the night, but legitimate locksmiths will detail their costs up front. "If we go out and something is different from what we told them on the phone, we tell them the price before we do the work," he says.

Be leery of any locksmith who shows up in an unmarked vehicle, acts cagey when questioned about the company or immediately recommends drilling out a lock.

If you live in a state where locksmiths are required to be licensed, you should check their credentials with the appropriate agency.

McMullen of the locksmith's association says his organization has pushed lawmakers in states without licensure to introduce legislation that would more closely regulate the industry, such as a Florida bill introduced in March that would require locksmiths to be licensed by the state's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

But McMullen says legislation and enforcement are only part of the way to stop scammers. "The real solution to the problem is consumer awareness," he says.



Leave a comment

Let us know what you think about this story.

To share your experience with a particluar health professional or service provider, please <u>submit a review</u>.

Comments may be edited for space and clarity. | COMMENTS POLICY

Tim McMullen, JD, CAE

The Associated Locksmiths of America is the largest association for locksmiths. We recommend you find a locksmith before you need one and put that person's phone number in your cell.

5/4/2010 2:00:48 PM

Gary Ford

Several ways to confirm you if the locksmith is real or a scammer are:

When you phone them ask them where they are located, if they will not tell you or want to know your address first most likely a scammer. Ask for business card. Look at their invoice before they do any work to see if it's got company info on it or it's just a cheap note pad type invoice. Pay by credit card you can get your money back from the credit card company if you are ripped off. If they show up in unmarked car or truck might be a scammer. Any questions call the Police, write down the license number of the car or truck. Ask for ID when the locksmith arrives, write down driver license number or State locksmith ID number. Get full cost estimate before they start working, get it in writing. You do not have to pay them anything if they do not have a state license. Eleven (11) states have licensing. If you do not feel comfortable or they threaten you call the Police. Most of the scammers do not have drivers licenses because they are illegal aliens. And the thought of the police will scare they away. 5/6/2010 7:59:34 AM

Robert Knueppel, CRL

Another tip; If the locksmith you call asks for your zip code, hang up because you have reached a call center which will reroute you to a local so-called locksmith. If you call one of these people out and they demand excessive payment, refuse to pay. Even if they call police. They must stick to the quote given over the phone. If you don't get an accurate quote, again hang up.

5/6/2010 4:01:12 PM

Jim Kubin CML

Another part of stopping the illegal and scam locksmiths is the phone books or internet advertising sellers. For them it seems to be all about the money and when they are questioned about why they allow bogus companies to advertise they almost always blame 3rd party resellers for the ads. Just my opinion but I think they just want the ad revenues. That needs to change.

In addition it seems that some states such as Illinois, doesn't have the money in the budget to aggressively go after the scammers.

5/7/2010 9:18:09 AM

Philip Sidel

It would seem reasonable to require a written estimate beforehand, with a statement that no changes will be performed or billed for without agreement from the customer. Do service companies object to this?

4/28/2010 1:35:04 PM

Angie's List staff

Ken,

Beginning in the fall of 2009, Angie's List began asking all companies on our list, and requiring all advertisers, to attest to their compliance with state and local licensing laws governing their trade(s). In addition, we've required our magazine advertisers to provide their license number(s) to display in their advertisement where it is required by law.

If a contractor is not properly licensed, it impacts their presentation on Angie's List, regardless of their relationship with us (rating, advertising status, award winner, etc.).

We are auditing (and will continue to audit) a random selection of companies to ensure that the self-reported information we're collecting is accurate.

Even in the articles that appear on magazine.angieslist.com and in our print magazine, our reporters verify that the contractors we interview are, in fact, appropriately licensed for their trade, as well.

Thanks for your comment!

4/29/2010 10:32:58 AM

Mike Bronzell

I would like to thank Emily for spending the time to do a QUALITY story regarding this huge scammer locksmith problem. It does alot to warn consumers about the locksmith impersonators that are operating all across this nation. It is also being perpetrated in Canada, England and other parts of the world.

I have been a locksmith for 20 years, I am a single father who was able to get by raising two kids and spending time with my kids also. Now it is almost impossible to compete for business against the lies, deceitful advertising that is being allowed to proliferate in yellow pages, internet search engines, 411 etc. Many Locksmiths are fighting this battle but need much help from the media and a whole lot more from Law enforcement. I am glad that MO and the postal Inspectors have spung into action. There is a whole lot more to do all across the nation.

5/4/2010 4:36:50 AM

Corey

lynn chambers, CRL

--

Lynn, I have gone to an auto lock out where there was no damage visible, but when I opened

the car there was some huge rips in the weatherstip (that I did not do). I asked the mother how it happened, and she thought I did it to her daughters car. She was so angry she did not want to pay me. She called her daughter at work to tell her what a horrible locksmith I was, but her daughter was honest enough to tell her she did the damage using a coat hanger, trying to open it herself..

5/21/2010 11:24:12 AM

Lynn Chambers, CRL

My former post-lynn chambers, CRL

"I know one thing-LOUISIANA requires ALL of us to be Licensed-INCLUDING YOU POP-A-LOCK. Stop sending our car openers to do a locksmiths job and having the customer sign a damage waver to cover your screw-ups. Get a license or don't come out! " $5/15/2010\ 11:03:06\ PM$

I need to make something clear since Pop-A-Lock has contacted me asking me to retract my statement-ANY Unlicensed company pretending to be a locksmith will be reported to Louisiana State Fire Marshalls Office.

I have verified that they do in fact have a least two licensed persons as locksmiths. My official Appology for stating that your company is not licensed.

5/21/2010 11:02:04 AM

Kristy Emerick

In response to Ms. Johannsen's comments. Consumer awareness is a very real solution to the problem. If the public is aware of the "scam" issue then one can guard against being taken advantage of. ALOA, the largest association of locksmiths is an excellent source in finding a legitimate locksmith you can trust.

5/6/2010 11:17:14 AM

Carl Carick

When I need my dead bolts re-keyed it was easy to go down to our local locksmith. He has a shop in town. Quick and easy.

5/2/2010 5:13:44 PM

Lisa Hawkins

WHY are all these people taking this crap? If you feel like you're beng ripped off, CALL THE POLICE YOURSELF, ON YOURSELF! You can bet your last penny, that a scammer will NOT hang out and wait on the police to get there when you feel you're being "robbed". Come on people, take a stand for yourselves and stop letting these people get away with this mess. 5/2/2010 10:18:21 AM

Donna Quinn

Thank you for your input. I haven't needed locksmiths in the recent past but I do want to know how to protect my home.

4/28/2010 2:08:57 PM

tim

FYI locksmiths in Virginia are licensed, and you can visit the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services to view the list

5/6/2010 9:47:02 PM

Corey

Larry, in response to your comment:

I am a Locksmith in Phoenix, Az. I hate checks. If I get a Chase check, sure write it to my business name. My bank won't charge me if it bounces. If I get a check from any other bank, they won't cash it if it's made out to my business name, because I have to have a Business Account with them. Sorry, but I am not going to eat a \$35 bounced check fee because someone didn't have the money in their account. It works both ways with this issue.

5/12/2010 12:51:51 PM

Kate Johannsen

I noticed that the last line of the story proclaimed that the only way to stop the scammers was through "consumer awareness". Blaming the victim is very popular, especially by organizations too lazy (or crooked) to clean their own ranks!

4/28/2010 2:51:25 PM

Jonathan

Two things: If you are locked out of your car, call your insurance company or AAA before calling a locksmith directly. I know in my area, my AAA service includes unlocking locked cars

Secondly, replacing a standard handle and lockset on a home door is not particularly complicated. If peace of mind is the consideration, perhaps the best solution is to replace the lock yourself - I've learned how to do so and have now replaced the locks on every exterior door and some interior ones in my home.

4/28/2010 3:11:54 PM

Pat

Don't they have to be bonded?

4/29/2010 5:55:04 AM

Lora Pallatto

Very few locksmiths have more than one location in the same city or town. When you see more than 6 listings for the same locksmith on Google Maps or Yahoo! Local, you're probably looking at a scammer.

4/28/2010 3:04:02 PM

DM

Here's a tip: If it's not an emergency or lockout, such as when you change the locks on a new house, have someone stay in the house while you take off all the locks and go into Home Depot to have them rekeyed for \$5 each. Depending how many doors/locks you have, this could be done in a couple hours. Call ahead to make sure the person that can do the rekeying is available that day, and go during a less busy time. You can do 8 locks for about \$45. Be sure to take in the original key since that may be needed depending on the brand of lock that you have

4/29/2010 8:09:05 AM

Larry Friberg

If the locksmith that you called changes prices BEWARE ASK WHY. If you don't agree with the price change don't use them. Beware if they ask for cash or check made out to the person and not a company. if you are scammed then file a complaint with the attorney Generals office, consumer affairs.

4/28/2010 3:58:39 PM

Randall Reed

Yes, locksmiths and locksmith companies are both licensed in California. Locksmiths and companies are licensed separately.

Here is a link to the official "look-up" page: http://www2.dca.ca.gov/pls/wllpub/wllqryna $slev2.startup?p_qte_code=LC&p_qte_pgm_code=2420$

Please note that some Locksmiths and locksmith companies have attained licenses and still operate illegally. They use fake addresses and multiple unregistered names in an attempt to look local. Also, having a license does not prevent shoddy work practices. Thanks for asking. $4/28/2010\ 1:16:09\ PM$

Ralph Forrest-Ball, CML

You left out Oregon. Oregon passed a law in 2009 requiring all locksmiths to be certified by the Oregon CCB no later than July 1st of 2010. All locksmith companies in OR must have CCB licenses and individual locksmiths must have locksmith certificates. Consumers may contact the CCB to find out who is licensed or to make complaints. http://www.oregon.gov/CCB/ $5/6/20105:18:07\,PM$

Jeff Olson

I agree with Jonathan...changing a home exterior lock yourself is actually quite easy. $4/29/2010\,1{:}24{:}16~\text{AM}$

Ken Jackson

At what point did Angie's List start caring if a contractor is licensed or not? I'm a incensed landscape contractor here in Las Vegas and Angie's List allows unlicensed contractors to advertise in their Magazine as well as online. It's very hypocritical of Angie's List to point the finger at other types of advertising when they are no better.

4/28/2010 7:17:12 PM

Tom King

Ca. has licensing requirements also. They also have contactors lic. requirements for jobs totaling over \$500, both license numbers should be on all ads and paper work. $5/9/2010\ 11:00:07\ PM$

Lisa

Another thing to watch out for is locksmiths replacing your locks with cheap locks. The locksmith I hired from Angie's List was excellent and charged me a reasonable rate BUT I had to get my front door lock replaced in 6 months because it broke (internal components). That meant hiring someone else to fix what should have been done right the first time.

4/28/2010 12:14:08 PM

Russ

I noticed that this industry was "infiltrated" with scammers when I did a google search for locksmiths in my area. I got about 6 hits for locksmiths on the main street of my town... long story short - there are no locksmiths in my town (something I already knew). This article sums it up - find out the legitimate places before you need them!

4/29/2010 5:15:29 PM

Joe

We are very concerned about this epidemic, and as a locksmith business we are asking our customers to ask more detail over the phone before deciding on a company. An honest locksmith service will be knowledgeable and upfront with you.

5/3/2010 5:29:32 PM

Donna Quinn

Are locksmiths in California licensed?

4/28/2010 12:52:21 PM

Steve

My wife locked the keys in car at the mall one day while shopping with the kids, and she was asked by the mall security guard if she had AAA. She said yes and he said I'll call them for you. A half hour later a big guy shows up and unlocks the car and then says he wants \$65 cash. She just gave him the card and he said he was not with AAA. He was A,A&A or something just like AAA. She didnt have the cash so he made her lock the keys back in the car!! I wish I had been there! This kind of thing needs to stop.

5/18/2010 8:01:36 PM

lynn chambers, CRL

I know one thing-LOUISIANA requires ALL of us to be Licensed-INCLUDING YOU POP-A-LOCK. Stop sending our car openers to do a locksmiths job and having the customer sign a damage waver to cover your screw-ups. Get a license or don't come out! 5/15/2010 11:03:06 PM

Corey

lynn chambers, CRL

Lynn, I have gone to an auto lock out where there was no damage visible, but when I opened the car there was some huge rips in the weatherstip (that I did not do). I asked the mother how it happened, and she thought I did it to her daughters car. She was so angry she did not want to pay me. She called her daughter at work to tell her what a horrible locksmith I was, but her daughter was honest enough to tell her she did the damage using a coat hanger, trying to open it herself..

5/21/2010 11:26:22 AM

Judith

Jeff's suggestion to contact BBB because they are consumer watchdogs is incorrect. BBB is a business advocate - read their mission statement. A company can have an A rating despite complaints as long as they provide a written response to complaints. The response does not have to be truthful and the company does not have to correct the problem. A company receives a B rating if they do not respond in writing. I know all of this from experience with the BBB and have my information in writing from BBB.

5/3/2010 9:20:43 AM

Lisa E.

I don't think that "being aware" is the only solution to the scamming problems we're having. Scammers feel pretty confident they can get away with this behavior because law enforcement is so lax. This is all the way from the police to the states attorneys generals who have fallen prey to the Contract on America and other criminal enterprises in the hallowed halls of justice. The public needs to step up to the plate and lobby their government officials to stop looking the other way and become proactive if they want to stay in office. Maybe Angie's List could have a 30 day Hot List of companies who have recently been accused of scamming; a sort of heads up. Any company receiving a lot of complaints in one area needs to be turned in and then the scammed need to follow up to ensure that these companies are taken off the playing field. If we don't insist something constructive be done, then the police and government are going to give it a pass and the problems will just continue. It's time in this country to demand the end of all of the scamming. No such thing was allowed to go on in our parents and grandparents day. What's wrong with us?

5/21/2010 6:45:24 AM

Jeff Pugh

There are several things you can do to protect yourself from getting scammed. One is to check credentials. Most states will require a license. Check your state's official website and research the locksmiths license status. Another resources is the Better Business Bureau (BBB). They are consumer watchdogs. Another sources for you to check is ALOA (Associated Locksmiths of America. This is a member group of locksmiths. Finally, ask your family, friends or colleagues for referrals.

4/29/2010 11:52:43 AM

Randall Reed

Another thought, check to see if they are members of ALOA (Associated Locksmiths of America) - here is ALOA's "find a locksmith link": http://www.findalocksmith.com/ 4/28/2010 1:41:21 PM

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