



Need a locksmith? That 'local' company may pick your pocket, not the lock

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Swampscott — Attention: Many locksmiths listed in your local phonebook are not who you think they are. So if you find yourself in a panicked emergency, and need someone to assist you, be sure you know whom you are dealing with.

It's a warning that Marblehead-based locksmith Carlo Fratini hopes will resonate with area residents from Marblehead through Swampscott, and through towns and cities across the North Shore. Locksmith fraud is on the rise, and people should beware.

"It's unbelievable," Fratini said as he ran his finger down the listings of the LocalTel yellow pages. "Fraud, fraud, fraud."

Fratini, owner of Seaside Lock & Key Locksmiths, said fraudulent listings are pervading phonebooks from the YellowBook to the Verizon Yellow Pages. He was recently outraged when an unknown company listed his company's address as its address, and when he called the company to complain, he got directed to an answering service.

Another company named Zero Zero 0024 Hour Locksmith lists its address as 5 Pleasant St., Marblehead, but if you were to walk to that location, you'd find that address doesn't exist. Those responsible for that particular listing could not be reached for comment.

The business named 24 7 Available Locksmith lists an address at 144 Stetson Ave. in Swampscott — another address that does not exist.

Fratini said that it's companies like these that are using local addresses to prey on people who are in an emergency, and are looking for a quick fix to their locksmith needs. They prey on panic, he said.

In reality, the fake addresses are listed to make people think the company has a local office. In fact, it's just a phone answering service that refers callers to somebody in the area who claims to be a locksmith and buys the company's answering services.

Worse, he says, locksmiths who show up to jobs from such businesses often price gouge their customers, and charge for services that they don't render.

Recently, a local resident had such an experience. The resident randomly looked up a phone listing for a nearby locksmith in the phone book. A gentleman showed up and charged her more than \$800 for a job Fratini said should not have cost more than a couple hundred dollars. The resident complained to a friend, who then told Fratini about the experience.

"It's so bad," the business owner said. He approximates that 25 percent of locksmith listings in the phone book are legitimate. "The rest — buyer beware."

But what can be done about such fraud?

Most phone books companies post a disclaimer somewhere in their phonebook releasing them from blame if a listing is fraudulent.

Marblehead Police Dept. Chief Bob Picariello urges those residents who have fraud-like experiences to file a formal complaint with the department.

The state's attorney general's office is also on alert.

"This issue has been brought to our attention in recent months," said Amie Breton, spokesperson for the state's attorney general's office. Breton advised that again, those who experience such practices should call the attorney general's consumer hotline: 617-727-8400. Breton would neither confirm nor deny whether the office is currently investigating into such matters.

Tim McMullen, legislative manager for the Texas-based Associated Locksmiths of America, said it's important for consumers to file complaints because it's the complaints that help drive forward legislation preventing these types of frauds. In Massachusetts, locksmiths are not licensed.

McMullen said he gets at least one call a day from consumers from across the country reporting these types of "scams."

"These companies are set up specifically to rip off consumers that are locked out of their car or home," McMullen said. He explained that the scam artists buy up large amounts of phone number listings and hire out contractors who are trained to rip people off.

"They are taught to size people up, and see how much money they can rip them off for," he said, adding that operators are also often listed in online business directories and turn up if a resident merely types the words "Swampscott locksmith" into a search engine.

For Fratini, the problem is frustrating, more than anything.

He urges people to become familiar with their local locksmith businesses before calling some random phone listing.

"You have to know who you are hiring," the business owner said. "You need someone with a reputation; don't hire them just because of their address."

Fratini recalls getting a call one day from a resident of Franklin Avenue in Swampscott. When Fratini said he was too busy to come that day but would be happy to be there the next day, the Franklin Avenue resident quickly said he'd call the locksmith on Stetson Avenue (an intersecting street) instead.

Of course, there is no locksmith on Stetson Avenue and only a garage building at the address listed in some of those "yellow page" directories.

Fratini advises that when someone hires a locksmith to come out to do a job, he or she should make sure of the flat rate in advance, and if the locksmith wavers from that number, it's a red flag that something is "shady."

And, he says, if you are locked out of your house or car, make sure you know that a cheaper option is to attempt to pick the lock before replacing it entirely.

"Do your research," he said.

Because, would you really want an unknown dealer replacing your lock? What's a lock for anyway?

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