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Group assists victims of water scam

About 30 Hispanic families were conned into buying expensive and unnecessary water-filtration systems

May 07, 2009

By **Chris Conrad**
Mail Tribune

MEDFORD — Help might be on the way for 30 Hispanic families that bought expensive water-treatment systems for their homes after a questionable test showed their water was unfit to drink.

The scam hit the Rogue Valley last year as salesmen from two companies focused on Medford Hispanic families, telling them their drinking water contained unsafe levels of chlorine. The families bought the companies' \$5,000 water-filtration system and soon were hit with payments tagged with high finance charges.

Medford has been nationally recognized for the quality and purity of its drinking water.

"Authorities we've spoken to are not pressing the criminal issue against these companies, but they have said it is a civil matter," said Larry Kahn, executive director of Help Now! the group tasked with helping the families try to recoup their money. "The simple fact is, these water-cleaning systems are not necessary here and they were sold through a faulty test."

Help Now! persuaded its 30 clients to suspend payment to finance companies working with American Home Solutions and Aqua Keen, the two California-based companies that sold the filtration systems.

Kahn said Hispanics in Woodburn and Hermiston have purchased filtration systems from the companies.

"We fear the problem could be more widespread than we originally thought," Kahn said.

Help Now! volunteers also have been trying to persuade finance companies to stop doing business with the controversial companies, Kahn said.

"We told them in a nice way that they might be on the hook, too," Kahn said. "There could be some liability if this goes to court."

American Home Solutions is not licensed to conduct plumbing work in Oregon, according to the state's contractor board.

Authorities in Salem have subpoenaed the companies and have asked them to turn over their list of customers, Kahn said.

"We would like to see who has been affected as we proceed," Kahn said.

Meanwhile, Help Now! might be expanding into California, to help with the state's large Hispanic, elderly and disabled population.

"They are our main clients and there's a lack of advocacy for them in California," Kahn said.

Help Now! does not charge a fee for its services. It is supported by donations from community members and staffed by volunteers, many of whom have legal training.

Anyone who has purchased an American Home Solutions water filtration system can call Help Now! at 732-1911 or visit the agency at 33 N. Central Ave., Suite 211, in Medford.

Reach reporter Chris Conrad at 776-4471; or e-mail cconrad@mailtribune.com.

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