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October 11, 2010

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Water-system scam victims are being repaid

Two companies reimburse those who bought unneeded filtration equipment

July 28, 2009

By **Chris Conrad**

Mail Tribune

MEDFORD — Refunds are trickling in to more than 40 Hispanic families who bought expensive water-treatment systems for their homes after a questionable test showed their water was contaminated.

"These families are very grateful to receive their money back in these economic times," said Larry Kahn, (note: **The spelling of this name has been corrected**) executive director of Help Now!, the nonprofit organization that has been helping the families recover their losses.

Salesmen from two companies targeted Medford's Hispanic population, telling homeowners their drinking water contained unsafe levels of chlorine. The families agreed to purchase the companies' \$5,000 water-filtration system and immediately were hit with high finance charges, Kahn said.

The water-filtration system is unnecessary in Medford, Kahn said, because the city has been nationally recognized for the quality and purity of its drinking water.

"These people were told that if they loved their children they should buy this system, which is simply not true," Kahn said.

So far, families have received full refunds for the \$5,000 system, while others, who purchased the equipment on a payment plan, have been reimbursed for the money they paid before the plan was frozen, Kahn said.

"We've had people get refunds of up to \$1,200," Kahn said.

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

Neither company is licensed to conduct plumbing work in Oregon, according to the state's contractor board.

Aqua Kleen paid to have licensed plumbers remove the systems from the homes and put the plumbing back the way it was before the water filter was installed.

Kahn said one plumber told Help Now! that the people who put in the water filters did shoddy work, often damaging the homes in the process.

"One of our clients had a large water leak under his house from the filter," Kahn said. "It wasn't there before he bought the system."

The scam was not limited to Medford, Kahn said. Hispanic families throughout Oregon have reported buying the system.

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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