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DEALING WITH THE STRESS OF MOVING

Susie Steckner, Special for The Republic

Professional mover Leor Ben-Moha puts hiring a mover right up there with stressors such as divorce and death, and he's only half joking.

The best way to get through it, he said, is by doing your homework before your furniture, clothing and keepsakes hit the road. That means background checks, asking the right questions, getting things in writing, even looking over a company's moving equipment. Consumers also should know where to file a complaint if necessary. "It's very, very stressful to move," said Ben-Moha, owner of Avalon Moving Systems in Glendale. "Customers have a lot to watch for."

Arizonans may have more reasons than other states. Arizona was ranked the second-most-active state for household moves, while Phoenix was ranked the seventh-most-active metropolitan area, according to 2005 data from the American Moving and Storage Association, a trade association for the moving industry. The previous year's data also put the state and city in the top 10.

Advocates say consumers should start looking for a moving company several weeks in advance of moving day. They suggest using recommendations from friends or co-workers, and warn against selecting a mover or moving broker solely because of a good-looking Web site.

It's relatively easy for consumers to check out companies and get advice on hiring a mover, thanks to online complaint reports and consumer-friendly tip sheets available through government agencies, the Better Business Bureau and others. The Arizona Department of Weights & Measures, for instance, helps regulate the moving industry and offers a list of all the companies it has investigated. The Better Business Bureau has an easy-to-use Web site that gives consumers general information about complaints, such as "sales issues," and whether the matter was resolved. AMSA, the trade group, offers its own certification process for movers. Called certified moving consultants, they agree to a code of conduct and then must answer to complaints filed against them through the trade group.

The Internet, meanwhile, is full of Web sites, such as www.movingscam.com and www.badmovers.org, that are aimed at helping consumers avoid troublesome moving companies. But be forewarned that some sites are run by people who had problems with movers, are trying to sell things or post complaints without verification.

After doing background checks, consumers should interview companies about their move. Advocates such as the BBB and AMSA offer basics to consider:

* Get several estimates and be wary of one that is much lower than the rest. The low estimate may balloon later with extra charges for things, such as moving bulky items or going up and down stairs.

* Ask if the person you are dealing with works for the moving company or is a moving broker. The latter arranges transportation, and that estimate may not match the moving company's estimate. The broker also isn't responsible for loss or damage.

* Have the mover inspect the household items in person to get the most accurate estimate of the move's cost. Show the mover everything, including items in garages, attics and basements. Be clear about packing and other services you want, which could impact the estimate.

* Ask whether the mover is using a binding or non-binding estimate. The former is an agreement made in advance and guarantees the cost of the move. The latter is not always accurate, and charges could be higher than expected. Get all estimates in writing.

* Before signing contracts, understand all the fees, the moving company's liability and pickup and delivery dates. Never sign blank or incomplete documents.

* Be on-site when your good are being packed and loaded, and unloaded.

Check out the companies

Consumers can check out moving companies and get advice about hiring a mover through several organizations. They include:

Better Business Bureau: Logs complaints against businesses and helps resolve disputes. On-line reports available about complaints against moving companies. (602) 264-1721 or www.phoenix.bbb.org.

Arizona Department of Weights & Measures: Helps regulate the moving industry and investigates complaints. Online reports available about movers that have been investigated. (602) 255-5211 or 1-800-277-6675 or www.azdwm.gov.

American Moving and Storage Association: Trade association for the moving industry and a consumer resource. Logs complaints and helps resolve disputes. Online information available about certified moving consultants in the Valley.

1-(703)-683-7410 or www.promover.org or www.moving.org.

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration: Federal agency within the U.S. Department of Transportation that works to decrease moving fraud. Provides complaint information on companies and has an easy-to-use Web site for researching a company's federal registration, safety rating, insurance status and more. 1-888-368-7238 or www.protectyourmove.gov.

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