ATLANTA SEPTEMBER 2011

Angies list.

blowing SMOKE

Sniff out crooked contractors as flue season approaches

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Chiropractic care | page 10 Finding osteoarthritis relief in Atlanta Second opinion | page 42 Don't put up with poor service

Pages of Happiness

You've come to the right spot for superlative reports. Members are asked to nominate these companies when they give all A's, write at least 500 characters, and confirm that work was performed and they'd hire again. We carefully review your nominations before selecting which ones to feature.



©photos.com

Alain's Pressure Washing LLC Marietta • 404-625-8468 alainpressurewashing.net

Owner Alain Becquet's work on cleaning, pressure washing and treating two decks impressed Neal Smith. "The job went superbly and was first rate," he says. "Alain is exactly the kind of person I've been looking for — serious about the quality of his work."

All Area Appliance Service & Repair Hampton • 770-707-1600 allareaservco.com

When her ice maker stopped working in the refrigerator, Sonya Donaldson says the technician handled it like a pro. "He assured me it was OK and MacGyvered a temporary solution while he ordered the necessary part," she says. "I can't say enough good things about his professionalism, knowledge and willingness to educate me."

Dr. Robert O. Kelly Oakwood • 770-503-1481

Michelle Palframan gladly logs the miles to see Dr. Kelly.. "For years, I've accompanied developmentally challenged clients to their appointments," she says. "His respectful and compassionate manner, even with the most difficult patient, was refreshing. He listens attentively and mindfully considers what I tell him. There's no shortage of practitioners closer to home, but a 30-minute drive is worth the peace of mind." "There's no shortage of practitioners closer to home, but a 30-minute drive is worth the peace of mind."

Dr. Rory B. Sprouse Marietta • 770-973-1380 sprousedental.com

Judy Renault praises the combination of up-to-date technology and great chairside manner during her visits







"The car looked flawless by the time he was finished." to Dr. Sprouse. "He has such a modern office," she says. "He is very kind, educates you and uses the best treatments and technologies. He treats me with such respect and his care is wonderful."

Got Carpets? Atlanta • 404-425-9707 gotcarpetsatlanta.com

Shani Anderson marvels at her restored sofa and love seat after an upholstery cleaning from owner Krystle Griggie. "I have two labs that love to sleep and slobber on them, so a cleaning was long overdue," she says. "She spent a lot of time and effort and made sure the hair underneath the cushions was well taken care of. Some of the dog hair was there for over a year, and there was no sign of it once she was done."

Lonadier's Mobile Detailing

Roswell • 770-375-9192 lonadiermd.com

Cheri Carter admits she's a clean freak, but says the detailing of her SUV by owner David Lonadier exceeded her expectations. "He spent four to five hours on my car — I was stunned he put that much effort into my vehicle, as it was in good shape to begin with," she says. "The car looked flawless by the time he was finished."

The Painting Pros Marietta • 770-517-8052

paintingprosga.com

Jean Marie Schiraldi loves the painting job owner Ron Desiderio and his team did on the basement playroom for her children. "Ron surpassed my every expectation," she says. "I can't say enough good things about their reputation, attention to detail and integrity. A couple small issues arose and Ron immediately fixed them. I was thrilled in every way."

Prime Fence Group LLC

Canton • 770-720-9734 primefencegroup.com

Sharon Post appreciates that owner Dennis Lehman worked with her homeowners association to get approval for a fence to keep her dogs contained. "My experience was outstanding," she says. "Dennis sat down with the president of the association to expedite the approval process. I went with the right company."





By Emily Udell

IT STARTED WITH a phone call. Patricia Talaszek hired one of the six or so companies that would call each fall offering to clean the chimneys connected to two woodburning fireplaces in her Staten Island home. When the technician said she'd need a chimney liner costing more than \$1,000, her natural skepticism set in: "We're New Yorkers so we tend to say: 'Wait a minute, here.'"

Talaszek declined the extra work and later hired the highly rated Harris Hearth & Home off Angie's List to examine her chimneys, only to find they were in tiptop shape. "I could have easily been ripped off," she says. "An awful lot of other people would have been ripped off by this, too."

Chimney cleaning and repair scammers tend to follow the patterns of those in other home improvement industries, luring homeowners via phone solicitations, door-to-door sales pitches or ads offering too-good-to-betrue prices and preying on fear and lack of knowledge to score quick sales. Once they get a foot in the door, they may claim costly How to sniff out crooked chimney contractors

repairs or products are needed immediately to prevent serious problems like carbon monoxide leaks or chimney fires. Some encounters don't turn out as well as Talaszek's.

Jim Sheehan initially thought the contractor who called his home with a cheap cleaning offer was a local one who'd swept his chimney the previous year. The Bloomfield, Conn., member wasn't even surprised when the technician from Clean Cut Chimney told him it needed more than a cleaning, citing serious problems with the flue and lining. "I bought the house from someone who had owned it for 20 years, and maintenance wasn't his strong suit," says Sheehan, who agreed to have a chimney liner and chase cap installed although he had never hired the company before. He ended up paying \$3,800 for work that wasn't completed and \$900 for a chase cap the company never delivered. When he tried to complain, he discovered the company was based in Port Jefferson, N.Y., and wasn't licensed to work in Connecticut.



Photo by John Griffin | John Pilger of the highly rated Chief Chimney Services in Smithtown, N.Y., says shady chimney companies target homeowners in his area.

"The next person who shows up is going to have a real hard time selling me anything — even Girl Scout Cookies," Sheehan says. A number for the F-rated Clean Cut was disconnected and a woman who answered at another number listed for the company said it was not connected to the business.

Consumer run-ins with deceptive chimney contractors seem to be concentrated in the northeastern part of the country, with many complaints targeting companies based on Long Island in New York, where Clean Cut was located, according to experts from the industry and law enforcement.

But negative experiences with chimney companies can happen anywhere. Member Richard Strecker

of Loveland, Ohio, says a technician dumped soot and debris beside his driveway after cleaning his chimney, and then denied it when he complained to the company's office. "When somebody lies to their boss, you wonder if maybe they're not shortcutting in other places," Strecker says. Eleven percent of Angie's List members responding to an online poll say they've had at least one negative experience with a chimney contractor and 2 percent say they've had nothing but bad experiences. Thirteen percent say they thought they'd paid too much or paid for services they didn't need.

"Where I live, this type of scam is very prevalent," says John Pilger, president of the highly rated Chief Chimney Services in Smithtown, N.Y. Companies in his area advertise a chimney cleaning for as little as \$29.95. "When I started out in 1986 with my own company, I was charging \$60," says Pilger, adding that Chief Chimney now charges \$175 for an inspection and cleaning. Pilger, who has tried to raise awareness by working with local and national media and consumer groups, says scams have been plaguing his industry for more than two decades. News stories and consumer alerts published in the last year indicate that they persist, alongside those that dog other home service industries like paving and air duct cleaning.

Early last year, police in Darien, Conn., arrested two men working for Priority Home Improvements of Massapequa, N.Y., after they allegedly tried to bilk an elderly resident out of \$1,200 worth of unneeded chimney repairs. Police in Tenafly, N.J., filed complaints against three other men associated with the same company in November.

"It's difficult to investigate and difficult to catch these guys," says Capt. John Trainor of the Tenafly Police, who estimates he's investigated about seven similar cases since 2002. "They have multiple billheads and keep changing the company names." There were no listings for Priority in Massapequa and one number formerly associated with that company was being used by another company. The shady business practices have spread as far as Maine, where the attorney general filed suit last November against a Massachusettsbased chimney repair business called Lysco Contracting for defrauding consumers and failing to register to conduct door-todoor sales. The suit alleges that the company contacted elderly residents and offered chimney inspections or cleaning for \$50 or less, and then

"It's difficult to investigate and it's difficult to catch these guys."

used scare tactics to sell unnecessary chimney liners for thousands of dollars. There were no listings for Lysco in Maine or Massachusetts.

Lyndhurst, N.J., member Christina Caporale joined Angie's List after her run-in with A-Safeway Improvements, which advertised a free chimney inspection in her local coupon mailer. "I had just bought a house, and I wanted to make sure the fireplace worked okay," says Caporale, who has young children. She says the technician warned that

Licensing for chimney work varies by state. Depending on the job, your contractor may need a license to make home improvements, work with gas appliances or otherwise. Before hiring, check local requirements, as well as affiliation with professional groups like the Chimney Safety Institute of America. her home was at immediate risk for carbon monoxide buildup, which frightened her into paying \$9,400 for repairs, a chimney liner and an extra chimney vent that she later came to believe was unnecessary. She says she felt pressured to add the extra \$3,800 vent to her work order when it was getting dark and the technician told her she'd be without hot water overnight if she didn't. "Bottom line: I was scammed," she says.

"Catch repairs when they're minor and save ... money down the road."

The Fair Lawn, N.J.-based A-Safeway has an F rating based on three reports. Owner John Nelson says that Caporale's chimney posed a hazard because the furnace was vented through the same shaft as the fireplace and his technician didn't notice that until he was installing the liner. "Obviously you can't make everyone happy but I try my hardest," says Nelson, adding that he has 20 years of experience.

As with hiring any contractor, it's best to receive multiple quotes before proceeding with work. Be wary of upfront prices that appear too good to be true, and don't let contractors pressure you into making snap decisions. Joe Sauter of Your Chimney Sweep in Indianapolis recommends homeowners hire chimney contractors who are insured and bonded. Sauter goes so far as having his insurance agent send proof that he's covered up to \$1 million to prospective customers. Sauter's agent, Brian May of the highly rated May Insurance in Fishers, Ind., recommends that customers validate insurance before service, and to make sure their chimney contractors have at least \$300,000 in coverage.

A legitimate contractor also should be able to provide photo or video proof if any extensive repairs are needed. "I carry a digital camera," says Sauter, whose company is A-rated with 410 reports on Angie's List. "We click a picture of their work order and the outside of the house and the next picture in line is their chimney."

Check whether your contractor is affiliated with groups such as the Chimney Safety Institute of America, which is one of only a few offering nationally recognized certification for the industry, according to experts. The Institute — or CSIA — provides technical training and consumer information with the aim of preventing residential fires and carbon monoxide poisoning. Professionals accredited by the CSIA receive training and adhere to a standard of ethics. There are approximately 1,500 CSIAcertified technicians of about 5,000 chimney companies nationwide,

ANATOMY OF A CHIMNEY

Familiarize yourself with the interior of your chimney, which may be composed of many parts. Your chimney setup may vary depending on whether it's connected to a fireplace, stove, furnace or another appliance. Ask your contractor for details.

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- 1 Chimney Crown (or Cap, Wash, Splay)
- 2 Flue
- 3 Chimney Chase
- 4 Flue Lining
- 5 Smoke Chamber
- 6 Smoke Shelf
- 7 Damper Assembly
- 8 Mantel
- 9 Fireplace Face
- 10 Lintel
- 11 Throat
- 12 Firebrick
- 13 Firebox
- 14 Outer Hearth
- 15 Inner Hearth
- 16 Ash Dump Door
- 17 Ash Dump
- 18 Clean Out Door
- 19 Ash Pit
- 20 Foundation
- 21 Footing

Illustration courtesy of Chimney Safety Institute of America

Chimney

Smoke Chamber Assembly

Firebox Assembly

Base Assembly

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12

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according to Institute spokeswoman Melissa Heeke. You can ask your contractor to show you their CSIA or other professional credentials, proof of insurance and any additional licensing that may be needed for your job. "It's very easy to pick up some tools and say you're a chimney sweep since it's a mostly unregulated trade," Heeke says.

While it's wise to be wary of fly-by-night companies, it's still important to service your chimney regularly to avoid any hazards. Although nearly 90 percent of those responding to the online member survey reported having a chimney, 56 percent say they've never hired a chimney service provider.

Whether your chimney is venting a wood-burning or gas

fireplace, wood stove, furnace or water heater, you should have it inspected annually and cleaned as needed, according to the CSIA. Creosote can build up inside your chimney, creating a fire hazard. Animals can take up residence or debris can accumulate, blocking a flue. A chimney professional can make sure there aren't any problems with the various parts that may comprise your chimney — such as the mortar, flue or cap — many of which can be difficult or impossible to ascertain without special equipment and a trained eye.

Jud Irish, vice president of the A-rated Chimney Specialists in Sumner, Wash., says that some homeowners consider their chimneys "out of sight, out of mind" and



Photos by Brandon Smith | Joe Sauter of Your Chimney Sweep uses a special camera to inspect the flue liner of a chimney in an Indianapolis home.

others are surprised that damage can occur even when a fireplace is infrequently or never used. "We see so many chimneys that need to be rebuilt from the roofline up because they've been neglected," Irish says.

The preponderance of rain in the Pacific Northwest makes chimneys highly susceptible to water damage, which can affect the interior and exterior of the structure. "You can catch repairs when they're minor and save yourself money down the road," Irish says. A chimney pro can not only spot problems taking root, but advise you on waterproofing. Heeke says an inspection and cleaning can cost as much as \$300, but professionals interviewed for this story quoted prices ranging from \$130 to \$175.

Have your chimney serviced before the burning season starts, around April through September, if possible. "We give off-season and new customer discounts," says Karla Swanson, one of the owners of the highly rated Chim Chimney in Sacramento, Calif. You're likely to get quicker service if you don't wait for the first cold snap of the year.

Member Jane Parsons of Shingletown, Calif., says she neglected her regular chimney maintenance for several years in an effort to save money, although she uses her fireplace with a face made of lava rock daily in the winter. "One day I started a fire and all the smoke started pouring



Photo by Michael Killingbeck Member Jane Parsons vows to have her chimney cleaned annually after having a chimney fire.

in the house," says Parsons, who then called the highly rated Flue Season Chimney Sweeps in nearby Redding. Flue Season determined she'd had a small fire, but was able to clean and repair the chimney in her unique mountain home for \$225. The company even sent a thank-you card with treats for her cats afterward. "I could have had a structure fire," Parsons says. "After that experience, I'm having it done on a yearly basis." \square

- with additional reporting by Ellen Miller

You can find reports about chimney pros under the following categories on Angie's List: Chimney Repair, Chimney Sweeps, Chimney Caps, Fireplaces and Gas Logs. Be sure to submit your own review after hiring.

second opinion



Spell out defined goals and expectations in a signed contract.

Don't put up with poor service

by Angie Hicks, founder of Angie's List

SINGER NEIL SEDAKA once crooned that breaking up is hard to do. Try breaking up with your contractor. Hurt feelings, broken contracts and the thought of spending extra money to get the job done makes ending a relationship with a provider awkward and emotionally draining. So, how do you know when it's time to call it quits?

Instead of breaking up, you might be able to make up by discussing your concerns with the contractor. But if you've talked until you're blue in the face and your contractor remains unresponsive, routinely runs late or violates your agreement, it might be time to cut your losses. Chances are, if you're dealing with problems early on and throughout a project, you're not going to be happy with the finished product. And the longer you wait, the more difficult it could be to move on.

Often, consumers stick with a contractor they're unhappy with because they've already invested significant money in the project; think it's too difficult to find someone willing to finish another's work; are fearful of upsetting the contractor; or have concerns about breaking the contract.

Read and understand your contract before you sign it. Make sure it contains a termination clause, so if certain objectives aren't met, you can break up easily. Of course, the goal is to find a good contractor in the first place so you never get to this point. What we've found is that the majority of our members' experiences with their service provider are positive. It's only natural. Most folks turn to the reviews on Angie's List to find a good provider and when they have a good experience, they want to share it.

If you must start over, though, research your next contractor beforehand. Read reviews on Angie's List; ask him or her about projects they've done similar to yours; have clearly defined goals and expectations spelled out in a signed contract by both you and the contractor; and document progress daily once the job begins.

Breaking up can be hard to do, but done smartly, it can save you a lot of heartache and headaches.

Time to move on?

It might be time to find another contractor if...

	The quality of the job is poor. Immediately make any concerns known to the contractor so he/she has the opportunity to correct or explain them. If they aren't addressed to your satisfaction, it might be time to end the contract.
March 2010	The contractor is always late or falling behind schedule. If time is an issue, be clear with the provider and remind them of the contract that says when they have to complete the project.
	The contractor exceeds the cost of the estimate. Determine if it's a justifiable and necessary expense not covered under the terms of the contract. If you agree to add cost to the project, insist they amend the terms of the contract to include the new estimate for the additional labor and materials.
	You develop a personality conflict. Try discussing your issues first, but sometimes, people just don't see eye to eye. If your contractor is not listening to — or outright ignoring — your wishes, it might be time to find another.
	The contractor violates the terms of your contract. Carefully read and understand the terms of your contract before you take action. Document everything with photos, video, receipts, written progress reports and other evidence that can support your case.



Angie's List Coupon Directory

FEATURED SERVICES	A2
HONOR ROLL	
AIR DUCT CLEANING	A4
ALARMS	
ANIMAL & HOUSE SITTING	A5
AUTO DETAILING	A5
AUTO GLASS	A5
AUTO SERVICE	
BASEMENT WATERPROOFING	A7
CABINET REFACING/RESTORATION	A6
CARPENTRY - WOODWORKING	A9
CARPET CLEANING	A8
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DENTISTRY - GENERAL	A68
PHYSICAL THERAPY	A70
PRIMARY CARE - INTERNAL MEDICINE	A70

SEPTEMBER Save with offers from top-rated service companies on Angie's List!

The Angle's List coupon section, which begins on page A4, is designed to help you hire smart and save money at the same time. The service companies featured in this section are offering you a discount on their services. Please note: By law, not all health advertisers are able to offer discounts. Any contractor or health provider advertising with Angle's List must maintain a rating of B or better. Please check the List before hiring for up-to-date ratings. Only the first page of each category is listed above.





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Angie's List Honor Roll





When referring friends, family or neighbors to Angie's List, be sure to remind them to tell us your name so we can send you your Big Mouth prize — *a big bag of M&M's.*

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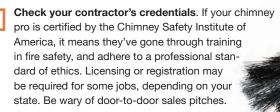


CHECKPOINTS FOR CHIMNEY SERVICE

Get a regular review. Even a rarely used chimney or one connected to a furnace or water heater can develop problems due to water damage, accumulated debris or other issues. Have it assessed annually and cleaned as needed.



Schedule before the burning season. Have a professional peruse your chimney before you start lighting fires. Look for discounts on service during the off-season.



Scope out the snapshot. If a service provider recommends expensive repairs, they should be able to provide photo or video images of the problems. Make sure the images are actually of your home and be wary of anyone who pressures you to act immediately.