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Editorial:

Consumer watchdogs

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When you shell out your hard-earned money to buy a big-ticket item say a car or big-screen TV or to hire a contractor to fix your roof or replace your kitchen floor, you expect, at the very least, to get what you pay for.

Unfortunately, all too often that's not the case. And nothing is more frustrating than playing telephone tag trying to get someone to take back the car that stalls at every stop sign or repair the roof that still leaks.

The good news is that Janice Garrett and Caroline Smith of Northwestern District Attorney David Sullivan's office have your back. They are available to tell you what your rights are and help you get satisfaction by mediating disputes, or pointing you in the right direction for further assistance. They've been around for awhile both have worked in the DAs office for at least 10 years but after nearly a year in office Sullivan has made their effort a priority and is working to get the word out about their services.

At the same time, his office is revising its website, northwesternda.org, to provide a wide range of useful consumer information for the public. It is an excellent service, for which we commend him. Though the website is still being worked on, it offers a complaint form, and advisories about particular scams or issues that are relevant at the moment. For example, it has a posting about precautions to take when shopping online this holiday season.

It also offers articles under its consumer resources section on matters such as renting a car, buying a used car, getting the most out of a warranty and securing and managing loans. It also addresses computer and Internet issues, identity theft, landlord/tenant matters and much more.

People are often confused about their rights, and Garrett and Smith say it is wise to enter into a

business transaction armed with as much information as possible.

They are happy to walk a caller through the steps of the states Lemon Law, for instance, before the purchase of a used car. There is the notion, Smith says, that there is a three-day-right to cancel a sale. Not so. And, a car has to be inspected within seven days after it is purchased to qualify for Lemon Law relief. Two crucial facts for a prospective buy to know.

If you are planning a home improvement project, they will send you helpful material, such as a copy of what a contract should look like, information about whether complaints have been filed against the contractor you have chosen, who should be registered/licensed and what kinds of insurance they should have.

But inevitably, things do go wrong, and they are ready to be the go-between. Consumers should make use of this resource rather than give up and forfeit their rights.

Smith or Garret say they will get on the phone with the business in question and listen to the other side of the story. Then they'll try to pull the piece together and work out a resolution.

There are also other protection agencies they can call on to help, such as the new consumer financial protection bureau in Washington that will intervene in credit card problems.

Even if the pair doesn't come up with the result the consumer is hoping for, it is likely that person will end up better prepared for further transactions.

It's easy for the average person to feel powerless and helpless and no one wants to feel they are wasting their money, particularly during these uncertain economic times. It's good to know there is someone with the cachet of the DAs office to step in and provide some muscle.