It’s Your Move! Very few events in life possess more potential for stress than having to move our belongings from one residence to another. This is why many consumers prefer to have a professional mover handle this rather arduous task. For those who choose this route, advance planning and research will help protect you from unnecessary or excessive expense. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services’ Division of Consumer Services is responsible for regulating intrastate movers of household goods. This consists of any move within Florida that does not cross the state boundary. The Division has this authority under the Household Moving Services Act which was created to help protect Florida’s residents from deceptive business practices and to protect those moving companies which have a proven history of providing quality services within our state.

The Division of Consumer Services received close to 400 moving-related complaints during the 2010-2011 fiscal year. These complaints typically involved billing disputes, damaged goods or claims filed with moving companies that were never satisfied. While most moving companies are reputable firms that will help to facilitate your relocation without incident, contracting for this service certainly doesn’t mean that all the details should be left in their hands. The following tips will help make your next household moving experience a positive one.

Plan Ahead When Possible – Try to give yourself between two and six weeks to plan and prepare for your move. During this period, have at least three companies come to your home and provide you with a detailed estimate. Prior to providing any moving services, a mover is required to supply you with a contract and estimate. This must be done in writing and must be signed and dated by both parties. Avoid companies that are only willing to do an estimate over the phone or Internet. In order to ensure an accurate estimate, a mover should see the items that are to be transported and discuss all aspects of the move with the shipper. You should also be cautious when contemplating the use of a moving broker. Many times these middlemen are found when using the Internet for research. Don’t rely on a broker’s sophisticated website for obtaining quotes as there is a distinct possibility that this method may actually be more costly.

Know Who You’re Dealing With Before Signing Anything – Research whether the company is registered with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and if any complaints have been filed against them. This can be done by inputting the name of the business into our “Business/Complaint Lookup” at www.800helpfla.com or by calling 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) and asking a member of our Consumer Assistance Center staff.

Read Before You Sign – Remember, the contract and estimate must be signed and dated by both parties and your signature indicates that you acknowledge and accept its terms. Read the entire contract and estimate thoroughly, ask questions and do not sign it if you have doubts about anything. Under Florida law, there are a number of items that must be incorporated into this document. For a complete list of the items that are required to be in the contract and estimate, visit www.800helpfla.com. You should also check to make sure that all the services you requested and require have been listed. Be aware of clauses that outline extra costs, such as fuel surcharges or fees for boxes and packing materials. Those charges are valid as long as they are spelled out in the contract.

Be Aware of Scams - Scams can occur whether you are dealing directly with a moving company or using a broker. A typical scam involves the shipper being asked to pay a broker or moving company a deposit or fee that is based on the estimated cost of the move. When the agreed upon pick-up date arrives, the mover is a no-show. Another scam begins when the moving company quotes a low price in order to secure your business, then increases the cost substantially after loading your household goods onto the truck. If you refuse to pay, the company will hold your belongings hostage until you comply. Keep a copy of your contract and estimate with you during the move to show law enforcement, if necessary. By law, a mover can refuse to relinquish belongings only when the shipper has not tendered payment in the amount specified in the written contract and estimate signed and dated by the shipper. Even then, under no circumstances can the mover refuse to relinquish prescription medicines and goods for use by children, including children’s furniture, clothing, or toys.

Consumers who are not satisfied with the services that have been provided should make the mover aware of their claim, in writing, as quickly as possible. If the company does not handle your claim satisfactorily, you may also want to file a complaint with the Division of Consumer Services. For additional information or to file a complaint, visit us online at www.800helpfla.com or call 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) from within Florida, 850-410-3800 from outside of Florida, or 1-800-FL-AYUDA (352-9832) en Español. A member of our Consumer Assistance Center will answer any questions you may have or direct you to the best resource for assistance.