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Media Contacts:

Kim Sue Lia Perkes
(512) 302-2076

Media@TxDMV.gov

Glenna Bruun

Southwest Movers Association
(512) 476-0107

Glenna@tmta.com

Officials Warn Texas Consumers of Moving Scams *Highlight Consumer Protection Law and Promote Moving Education*

HOUSTON – Illegal moving companies are operating statewide, taking a financial and emotional toll on Texans who find themselves faced with losing everything they own or paying a ransom to release their belongings.

Government and moving industry officials at a press conference Tuesday cautioned Texans to do their homework before hiring a moving company and encouraged the law enforcement community to take note of a new state law that imposes fines and jail time against unlicensed movers.

There is a lot at stake.

“They are stealing a part of our lives, taking everything from irreplaceable photos to family heirlooms that no amount of money can replace,” said John Walker III, a Texas Department of Motor Vehicles Board member and the owner of a Houston trucking business.

The Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TxDMV), which licenses moving companies, and the Southwest Movers Association, Texas’ trade organization for licensed moving companies, sponsored the press conference at the TxDMV Regional Service Center to raise awareness about the prevalence of moving scams in the state and nation.

More than 60 percent of the moving complaints received at the TxDMV deal with unlicensed movers. To operate legally, a moving company must display a valid TxDMV or United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) license number on the truck.

“It is of utmost importance that we educate consumers today with the start of National Moving Month, the beginning of the summer moving season and the time of year when Texans are most likely to hire a moving company,” said SMA’s Executive Director John D. Esparza. “Illegal and unethical, fly-by-night moving operators think of summer as prime time to prey on unsuspecting Texans and we will not tolerate these heinous actions.”

Linda Bauer Darr, president and chief executive officer of the American Moving & Storage Association in Alexandria, Va., the industry’s national trade group, said moving scams are a national problem. With so many things on the move “to-do list” people often don’t spend the time investigating who they are about to hire.

“They need to stop for a minute and ask themselves ‘Who am I about to let into my home?’ because it might just be some guy living in a basement or with a criminal record who is going to show up with a rented moving truck to cart off everything you own,” she said.

Assistant Chief John Trevino of the Houston Police Department’s Special Investigation Command said he knows where Texans should never hire a mover: Free internet advertising sites.

“The most important piece of advice I can offer those planning a move is not to hire your mover from a free internet advertisement,” he said.

In March, the Houston Police Department arrested two men suspected of using hostage tactics in Houston, San Antonio, Dallas and Austin. The pair ran an unlicensed moving operation that promised cheap moves, but held customers’ household goods hostage, demanding hundreds of dollars in additional money before they would unload the truck. If a customer refused to pay, the truck drove off.

In the past police departments felt hamstrung and unable to help victims of moving scams because of the lack of accountability in the law. Unlicensed movers would show a contract riddled with hidden fees but signed by the customer. Under a new state law, unlicensed movers can receive up to a \$4,000 fine and a year in jail for operating illegally in the state.

Trevino encouraged police departments throughout the state to use the law, and to also consider using their cyber-crimes units to pro-actively find illegal movers.

However, Trevino added, it will take more than the police to run illegal moving operations out of the state.

“One police department cannot solve the state’s problem with illegal movers, but all of us working together - law enforcement, lawmakers, the TxDMV, the moving industry, and Texas citizens - can make sure illegal operators know there is no business for them in the Lone Star State and anyone who tries will be prosecuted under the law,” he said.

TxDMV Enforcement Director Bill Harbeson said the agency is working to educate police and sheriff’s departments on the new law, and is stepping up its efforts to inform Texans how to avoid hiring an illegal operator with its “Don’t Make a Move Without Us!” consumer awareness program.

Before hiring a moving company, Texans can find out whether the company is licensed by going to Moving Companies on the TxDMV website (www.TxDMV.gov).

“The best protection is to know who you are dealing with before the move starts,” Harbeson said. “Do not be a victim.”

To learn how to hire a reputable Texas moving company, go to:

Texas Department of Motor Vehicles, www.TxDMV.gov

Southwest Movers Association, www.mytexasmover.com

Better Business Bureau of Greater Houston & South Texas,
www.BBBHouston.org; www.BBBSouthTexas.org

For out of state moves, more information is available from:

American Moving & Storage Association, www.moving.org

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, www.fmcsa.dot.gov