



The 2014 RBC Insurance Charity Golf Classic raised \$200,000 for the Peel Children's Aid Foundation late last month at RattleSnake Point Golf Club in Milton. Here, RBC Insurance president Neil Skelding (right), based in Mississauga, receives some instruction from PGA Tour professional David Hearn.

Staff photo by Iain Colpitts

Making a 'move' against scammers

By Mike Beggs

What's to be done with the proliferation of "rogue movers"?

That's a burning question in the minds of many ripped-off consumers, and certainly in that of Jim Carney, president of the long-running Rawlinson Moving & Storage Ltd., in Mississauga.

He sits on the Board of the 400-member Canadian Association of Movers (CAM), which has been calling for a crackdown on these unscrupulous scammers, and has declared 2014 to be the Year of the Reputable Mover.

The CMA says about 4.5 million Canadians move every year, and they're subject to an increasing number of incidents involving fraud, theft, threats, extortion, and hidden fees. According to the Better Business Bureau, the moving industry ranks fifth amongst complaints, and southern Ontario accounts for almost one-third of them.

"Everybody's got horror stories," Carney says. "Basically, there's a lot of vulnerable people out there -- older people, single people, even families. They don't move very often, and when they do they're not sure which avenue to take. They tend to gravitate towards phoning -- and that's one of many things that gets you into trouble. There are many, many movers who don't have any trucks, just a nice website."

"Some of these guys can be traced to seven or eight moving companies on the Net, to avoid the heat."

In a commonplace scenario, they will low-ball a quote over the phone without a physical inspection of the goods. Then come moving day, they'll say the job was bigger than expected and demand an exorbitant amount up front to continue.

"Since it's moving day, you don't have time to find another mover. And they end up charging three or four times the original cost. Then, they want payment before the truck even leaves," Carney relates. "If you don't pay, they just confiscate your goods as collateral. They just hold your goods for ransom, and it's your prized possessions, your keepsakes."

And that may only be the starting point. They often start tacking on incidental costs -- for stairs, heavy items, etc. Customers report prized possessions being broken or going missing in the move, and of (often unqualified) movers damaging walls and refusing to repair them.

Ian Mason, a veteran Mississauga mover with Atlas Van Lines/Mike The Movers suggests, "it sort of serves people right in a roundabout way", when they opt to go with the cheapest mover off of notice boards, or the Net (who often is going to just, "rent a truck for the day)."

The mindset is, "'We only charge \$45 an hour' -- plus, plus, plus," he relates.

The odds are a lot better going with one of the major, nation-wide moving lines, "where they have competent staff, and good equipment."

This issue was thrown into high relief with the CBC Marketplace expose on "Rogue Movers", documenting the nightmarish move of Dave and Kim Lague from Nova Scotia, to Welland, Ont, in which they ended up paying a whopping \$5,000 (well above the original quote of \$1,650) and waited an arduous six months just to get their belongings back (including specialized medical equipment critical to Kim's health!).

It turned out their Quebec-based mover was in debt, and the truck in question was seized by its

owner, and just sat for six months -- with the Lague's worldly goods onboard -- before the CBC tracked it down in a Montreal parking lot. Carney took it upon himself to finally deliver the family its possessions, free of charge.

"It just creates a bad name for movers," he told the Niagara Tribune, afterward.

There are currently no regulations in place to safeguard consumers, making it a bit like the Wild West. And because the moving industry operates under the regulations in provincial traffic and consumer protection legislation and the Criminal Code of Canada, Carney says they're often caught in an, "inter-jurisdictional black hole".

In 2010, Toronto Police shut down a ring of moving companies that allegedly extorted and intimidated their clients into paying exorbitant fees to move their belongings.

However, Toronto city council's subsequent attempt to license movers failed, when the province opted not to amend the City of Toronto Act to accommodate them. (South of the border, the federal government more recently stepped in with legislation to help people held hostage by movers).

Carney stands behind the idea of licensing, but acknowledges that shady operators would still be tough to police.

"It's no wonder movers have the name they do. Because it's just too easy," he comments.

"Anyone with a truck wants to become a mover. It's very sad."

The only real protection for the consumer is Buyer Beware. If planning to move, you're advised to:

- Research online, and read reviews of the company.
 - Call the Better Business Bureau, and ask the company for references.
 - Never pay cash, and get the terms and conditions of your move in writing.
 - Check credentials, and confirm insurance (making sure to read the fine print).
 - Get at least three in-home estimates for the move
 - Be on alert for warning signs like an unmarked truck, dirty packaging materials, and employees without uniforms.
 - And move valuable items yourself.
- "That's the most important thing. People have to research. And get an in-house estimate, not just over the phone -- because you could be talking to somebody on the East Coast," he continues. "If you have concerns, go out and take a look at where their office is."

"Do they have a physical investment? Do they have a van, do they have trucks? Does the mover belong to a van line? We've been a member of Allied Van Lines since 1930. That basically constitutes stability, if nothing else."

With a disturbing 1 in 4 Canadian moves ends up in a complaint, the CAM is attempting to engage ministries across the country to find a coordinated solution. But to this point they've, "basically received the brush-off."

"The problem is, there's no governing body to take on this issue. Is it federal? Is it provincial," Carney adds?

"Until the government tries to take a stand, it's going to continue to go on. Truly our only recourse is to create awareness, until some government body steps in and says, 'Enough already.'"

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