

Our Watchdogs Are Hard at Work

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 15 February 2023 17:17

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Wisconsin's Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) safeguards consumers from deceptive practices and services. This week, Senator Smith discusses 2022's top ten list of most common consumer complaints, which describe many of the ways DATCP can help consumers protect themselves from fraud.

MADISON - The Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) may be the most diverse agency in our state. It's often referred to simply as the "Department of Ag," which is understandable since agriculture is such an important industry to Wisconsin. "Trade" covers all of our industries and how we transport goods across the globe. But we often forget the immense responsibility the state and DATCP have for protecting consumers.

In 2022, DATCP worked to resolve over 11,000 consumer complaints, reaching settlements that returned millions of dollars to Wisconsin consumers like you. The top ten complaints they received may resonate with many of us, who experience similar frustrations in our day-to-day lives.

In the style of David Letterman, here's what they reported:

10. There were 184 complaints around new and used auto sales last year, including reports of inadequate disclosures and misleading representations in advertisements.

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9. New to the top ten list was home furnishings. The Department received 189 complaints, including failure to provide services or deliver goods, along with misleading practices.

8. Also new to the top ten this year were health and medical products. 217 of the complaints involved billing disputes, failure to deliver and refund policy concerns, among other issues.

7. 224 complaints had to do with travel, which includes vehicle rentals, airline service, hotel complaints and travel company bundling. Billing disputes, refund policy and just plain unsatisfactory service were among the complaints.

6. Medical services are a category separate from medical products. There was a 60% increase in medical services complaints, with 440 complaints filed. Billing disputes and deceptive practices topped the list. A practice known as “surprise billing,” when a patient receives an unexpected bill from an out-of-network provider or facility, was among the most common complaints. A [federal law](#) went into effect in 2022 to protect patients from surprise billing, but it’s still very important for consumers to report any failures complying with this new law.

5. Identity theft was the fifth most common complaint. DATCP handled 513 complaints in this category last year. The Department can help recover and secure your identity from further fraud, and spends time with consumers educating them on how they can avoid having their identity stolen in the future.

4. A common frustration all of us can relate to are telecommunications issues. Cell phone and internet providers might misrepresent the service they provide, or sometimes unfairly terminate service. DATCP handled 655 telecommunications complaints last year.

3. Whenever disaster hits, DATCP issues warnings about fly-by-night roofing, siding or other construction contractors. Last year the agency received 1,216 complaints about home improvement services, more than double last year’s number. Complaints included failure to honor warranties, failure to properly disclose lien waivers, poor workmanship and sometimes just failing to provide services or materials as promised.

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2. A pet peeve of many, and a complaint I hear time and again, is telemarketing. In fact, my office receives at least a call a day trying to sell us life insurance. Telemarketing resulted in 1,651 complaints, but I'm sure that represents only a tiny fraction of the number of calls that could be reported. Robocalls, phishing, imposter calls and harassment complaints top the list. Even the Wisconsin Do Not Call Registry cannot block all of these calls, as many disregard the list and call anyway. Keep reporting and be vigilant for scams and fraudulent claims.

1. The number one category of complaints involved landlord-tenant complaints. When disputes cannot be resolved between a landlord and a tenant, DATCP gets the call. That happened 1,912 times in 2022. Top complaints included failure to return a security deposit, eviction, unauthorized entry and structural issues.



It's always good to be wary of deceptive advertising, calls and promotions, but it sure is good to know we have a watchdog like DATCP. If any of the situations described above sound familiar to you, if you find yourself in a situation you feel is unfair or you are being cheated, call the Consumer Protection Hotline at (800) 422-7128 or email DATCP at DATCPHotline@wi.gov. It's important for Wisconsinites to know resources are available to them and the experts at DATCP are working for us.