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DATELINE NBC

Where's my stuff?



today show

'Dateline' investigation catches movers holding household goods hostage for huge payments

Watch this report from NBC's Victoria Corderi for an inside look at what Dateline found when it investigated some moving companies.

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NBC News

Jan. 17 — You're making the biggest move of your life, packing up your home and all your memories, moving out. Every year, millions of Americans entrust all their worldly goods, their furniture, their expensive electronics, their family photos and heirlooms, to total strangers with trucks. Most are honest, but a new breed of mover is cropping up, ready to take your business — and then take you for everything they can. And if you don't pay what they ask, you may never see your stuff again. Correspondent Victoria Corderi has a 'Dateline NBC' hidden camera investigation.

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Victoria Corderi
NBC CORRESPONDENT

TYRONE AND REGINA Kelley started off the year ready to leave Massachusetts and gamble on living in Las Vegas.

“We were looking forward to being able to experience all of these new, wonderful things,” says Tyrone.

They arrived in Las Vegas last January. Once they got their belongings, this new life they’d envisioned would begin in full.

“It would never occur to me that it would be possible for somebody to steal all of our stuff and get away with it,” says Tyrone.

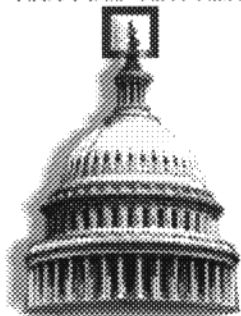
They found out about an ugly little secret in the moving industry — and once you learn the secret, it’s too late, too late because by then you’re standing in your empty new home and all of your belongings, everything you own, are somewhere else. And the only way to get them is to pay what some consider ransom. Sounds like a crime, right? Sounds like a situation where someone — the police, the government — someone could help you. But as the Kelleys and many others are finding out every day, that’s not necessarily the case when it involves the moving industry.

HOW MUCH DOES IT WEIGH?

Our ‘Dateline NBC’ investigation, including our own moves documented by hidden cameras, reveals that though many in the industry are honest, many others are taking consumers and all of their belongings for a ride.

The Kelley’s found the company, N.Y.-based U.S. Movers, on the Internet. Their estimate, based on

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weight, was \$1,482 for their cross country move. They paid \$100 down.

The movers arrived in Las Vegas a week late, with a shocking announcement.

“They said they wanted \$3600,” says Tyrone, “or, they say, ‘we’re not going to unload the truck.’”

U.S. Movers claimed the Kelley’s belongings weighed some 25,000 pounds more than the original estimate, and they provided these weigh slips which they say prove it. Weigh slips show how much the truck weighs empty and with the load. But Tyrone says he didn’t believe it.

“I was thinking, what in the world are these people trying to pull?” says Tyrone. “They must think I’m stupid.”

Tyrone says he requested a reweigh of the load, but the movers refused unless he paid the full amount first. He told them he would go get the cash, but instead he went to the police.

Moving? Check out these tips

- Make plans well in advance. Leave enough time to have movers come to your home and give you a detailed in-home estimate. Contact several movers and compare prices and services.
- Make sure the mover you select is licensed and insured by checking the Department of Transportation Web site, and check the Better Business Bureau rating.
- Check references. Try to get a first-hand recommendation from someone who has used the mover.
- Make sure you receive and read "Your Rights and Responsibilities When You Move." Reputable movers will provide this when giving in-home estimates.
- Never sign blank or incomplete documents, especially addendums, and make sure you understand anything you sign.

What was their reaction when they saw Tyrone come back with the police?

“Oh, they were stunned,” says Tyrone. “They were stunned, but they weren’t intimidated.”

Maybe that’s because the drivers already knew something Tyrone was about to find out from the police officer. Most of the time, police consider this a contract dispute, a civil matter not for law enforcement.

The police left, and the movers drove away with Tyrone’s belongings.

“I said, ‘I’m being robbed. It certainly seems criminal to me,’” says Tyrone.

So, for the next three months, Tyrone Kelley went on a frustrating odyssey, pleading his case to state and

federal agencies, politicians, consumer groups, and law enforcement, all to no avail.

"In the past three months, I've had a chance to do a lot of legal research," says Tyrone. "And a whole slew of federal laws have been broken here."

But if that's the case, why was Tyrone still sitting there in an empty room?

"That's the question I ask myself everyday," says Tyrone.

DATELINE INVESTIGATES

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It appeared that the Kelly's new start in Las Vegas had become a dead end. So we asked Tyrone to retrace some of his steps, this time with 'Dateline NBC,' and we would ask the questions.

First stop was Ace storage facility, where U.S. Movers was holding Tyrone's

belongings. The manager wasn't there, but we spoke to him by phone.

Victoria Corderi (phone): "Mr. Ratliff, hi, I'm Victoria Corderi with 'Dateline NBC'. I'm here with Tyrone. Can you explain to me why he can't get his things back?"

The manager said he couldn't help because the problem was between Tyrone and the moving company.

Corderi (phone): "I mean the bottom line, you're saying anything short of a court order, will keep this man's stuff in storage."

"You've experienced for yourself what I've been dealing with now," says Tyrone.

Next stop was the Las Vegas Police Department, another place where Tyrone says that no one would listen to him. He says he went there three times.

Suddenly, with our cameras there, Tyrone's luck seemed to change dramatically. Lt. Spinoza came out and agreed to meet with us.

Tyrone: "It's been several months now. I'm tired of sleeping on the floor when my stuff is only a couple of miles from my house in a storage facility."

Lt. Spinoza: "Tyrone, to tell you the truth, this is not a simple burglary, not a simple robbery. There are a lot of tentacles on this thing."

Corderi: "Do you think this can get resolved?"

Lt. Spinoza: "Are we done with the cameras?"

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With the camera off, Lt. Spinoza came up with a plan, and he allowed Dateline NBC to follow along.

The police took the extraordinary measure of convincing a judge to issue a search warrant on the grounds that U.S. Movers attempted to obtain money under false pretenses.

Police unloaded the unit and headed for a weigh station. Finally, the argument would be settled.

U.S. Movers claimed they Kelley's belongings weighed 4650 pounds, but at the weigh station, police measured the weight at 3460 pounds. It was vindication, the proof Tyrone had been waiting for.

"One thousand pounds less than what the movers insisted in was," says Tyrone.

U.S. Movers was trying to charge the Kelleys for a 1000 pounds they didn't have. It turns out that Tyrone was right.

"According to the search warrant, it now belongs to him," said a detective, motioning to Tyrone.

"Hallelujah!" Tyrone shouted. "Whew."

Tyrone, who had paid only a \$100 deposit, never spoke to the moving company again. But 'Dateline NBC' did. U.S. Movers declined to be interviewed on camera, but told us Tyrone agreed to the increased estimate ahead of time and they had the right to collect the full amount before any reweigh. U.S. Mover's also said they did not use false weigh slips regarding the Kelley's shipment, yet they didn't not provide any explanation as to why the Kelley's belongings weighed 1000 pounds less than what U.S. Movers claimed.

"Now it feels real," says Tyrone.

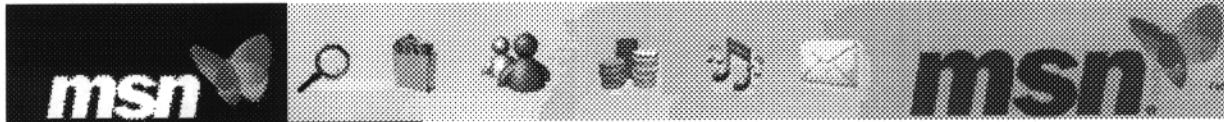
Now, the Kelley's say they finally will be able to live their Las Vegas dream.

"It's going to be like Christmas," says Tyrone. "Maybe we'll put up a little tree."

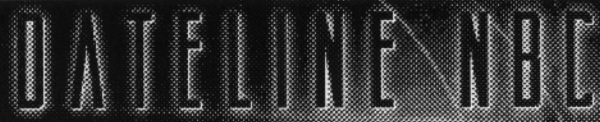
It turns out, though, that this is a happy ending in a sea of hard luck stories.

There are many others around the country still reeling from from their moving day rip-offs, victims of what some call the perfect scam.

STORY [Read Part 2: Victims of moving scams tell their stories](#)



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What should you look for?

Victims of moving scams tell their stories

NBC News
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Jan. 17 — They are all in different parts of the country, but they have a lot in common. They're living in their new apartments or houses, pretending to the outside world that life is good, when in reality their lives are a wreck.

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Victoria Corderi
NBC CORRESPONDENT

“YOU’RE PUTTING UP this facade of this normal life you have, when you’re actually sleeping on the floor, eating on the floor,” says Bridget. “You’re living this nightmare.”

They’re all smart, educated people, a lawyer, a nurse, office managers, consultants, and all of them say they got taken by moving companies they found on the Internet.

When Dateline NBC met them, they were still in the middle of their moving mess. We asked them to videotape their experiences.

They found each other through a Web site, MovingAdvocateTeam.com. It was started by a Florida man, by day a loan officer, by night, a victim-turned-crusader. His own moving horror story spurred him to action.

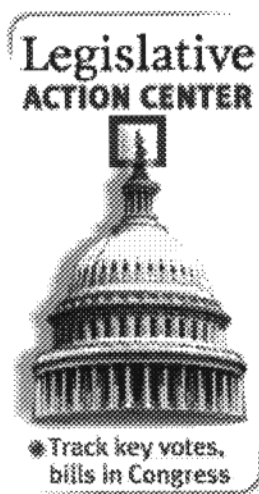
“The moving company [ripped] off everything I own, everything my family owns,” says James Balderrama. “Stealing my memories and with a smile on their face.”

Balderrama’s passion is one part outrage and one part amazement at what he calls the the beauty of the scam.

“It’s a perfect crime and anybody in America can do it,” says Balderrama.

Balderrama has started a virtual grass roots movement to go after bad Internet movers. He name names and tries to help people who are living in limbo, not knowing if they’ll ever see their belongings again. He says that even though these companies have different names, their m.o. is the same. There’s pattern to the moving scam you can identify right from the first phone call.

“They know what they’re doing,” says Balderrama.



“It’s like a script, it’s perfect.”

HOW IT WORKS

And the script begins with Act One: “Have We Got a Deal for You.” The Web sites of the moving companies are slick, complete with consumer recommendations, federal license and insurance numbers, and the promise of very low prices.

“The estimate came in so low,” says Sylvia. “We were just ecstatic.”

It’s just the pretense, Balderrama says, of top-notch customer service.

“They’re very nice on the phone when you first come in to contact with them,” says Balderrama. “They act like they’re your best friend.”

So the people who used them really had a sense of well-being.

“Yeah,” says Matt.

Moving? Check out these tips

- Make plans well in advance. Leave enough time to have movers come to your home and give you a detailed in-home estimate. Contact several movers and compare prices and services.
- Make sure the mover you select is licensed and insured by checking the Department of Transportation Web site, and check the Better Business Bureau rating.
- Check references. Try to get a first-hand recommendation from someone who has used the mover.
- Make sure you receive and read “Your Rights and Responsibilities When You Move.” Reputable movers will provide this when giving in-home estimates.
- Never sign blank or incomplete documents, especially addendums, and make sure you understand anything you sign.

“We had no clue what was about to happen,” says Jonna.”

What happened to them and the others, says Balderrama, is Act Two in the script: You’re Way Over.

In other words, says James, “once we get your stuff, then the game begins.”

Once the movers have the boxes in the truck, estimates skyrocket, doubling, even tripling. It’s a numbers game with the consumers on the losing end. Sometimes it happens on the day of the move.

Victoria Corderi: “When they had the truck completely packed, what did they say?”

Sylvia: “He said, ‘Well, as it all settles out this is actually gonna be about \$11,000.’”

Emily: “From a \$1,500 estimate.”

And other times it happens on delivery day.

“They called and said they’re coming tomorrow,” says Jonna. ““Oh, by the way, you don’t owe us \$1,600, you owe us \$8,800. See you around two o’clock.””

And there’s virtually nothing anyone can do about it, especially if people are moving on a deadline. It’s Act Three of the script: “Time is Not on Your Side.”

The movers know you are in a hurry.

“You’re standing in an empty apartment,” says Sylvia. “Everything’s out front. It’s 10:15, and you’re supposed to like, you see, you’re supposed to be 3,200 miles away starting your new career, opening your new office Monday morning at eight o’clock.”

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They all tried to argue with the moving companies about price, and that’s when, Balderrama says, the mask comes off. Suddenly, it’s Act Four: “No More Mr. Nice Guy.”

“As soon as it’s on the truck, it’s like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” says Balderrama. “It’s

‘f-you’ this, it’s ‘screw you’ that, ‘don’t you talk to me this way ever again,’ blah blah blah. ‘You pay what I want or I will guarantee you’ll never see your stuff again.’ Period.”

“The guy said, ‘If you guys don’t start speaking nicely to me, you’ll never see your stuff again,’” says Emily. “It’s ransom. You know, they hold you hostage for your things.”

GOTCHA

That means Act Five: “They’ve Gotcha.” And they know it, says Balderrama. After all, you have no choice but to pay if you want to get your belongings back.

“You’re entrusting everything that, you know, encompasses your life, your roots, your memories, with these people,” says Bridget.

One New York couple tried to fight the movers when their estimate skyrocketed from \$3,000 to \$8,000 after they had already paid half down. They began doing intense research and found a body of laws they thought would help — especially one designed to protect consumers from having their belongings held hostage. It says movers can only charge up to 10 percent more than the original estimate upon delivery.

If the movers think they're owed more, they have to wait until later to try to collect the balance.

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So the couple told the movers they had the money, but when the truck arrived they said they would pay only what the law required.

“He got indignant, huffed out,” says Jonna. “‘Stop the move. Stop the move,’ he was calling to his buddy. And they stopped the move. I said, if you drive away with our things on your truck, we’re gonna have you arrested. And guess what? They laughed because they know that the police aren’t going to come.”

Everything she knew, everything she studied — and she’s a lawyer — meant what in this case?

“It mean, that here’s a wonderful body of law,” says Jonna. “But you might as well line the birdcage with it because it’s not good for anything else.”

The law rarely is enforced and even when it is, unscrupulous movers have another way to stay one step ahead with the name game: closing up shop when there are too many consumer complaints and reopening under new names, making it impossible for consumers to check them out.

The North Carolina women hired the Florida company Apollo Van Lines, but Majesty Moving and Storage, a company with numerous consumer complaints showed up. Apollo and Majesty are run by the same man.

“I really felt dumb,” says Emily. “How could I have not just typed in, Majesty Movers? I know why. Because that’s not the company I contacted.”

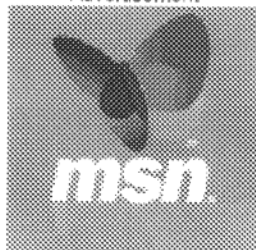
The New York couple hired Ameri Van Lines, the same people used to run Florida companies AAA Van Lines and Moving System. Moving System scammed James Balderrama.

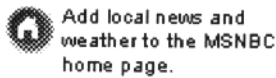
“They just resurrect themselves as, you know, two men’ll move you someplace else,” says Balderrama. “They just change the name. It’s the same players. And they do it to someone else.”

‘Dateline NBC’ watched as their stories unfolded, as they tried different tactics to get their things back. A Wisconsin couple was willing to pay \$1,300 more than the estimate. Then, on delivery day, the company, Advanced Moving Systems of Sunrise, Fla. showed up and demanded even more. The movers wouldn’t back down and they drove away.

In this case, unlike in most others, the police were willing to help. It turns out the drivers were wanted in

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another state for criminal charges related to another move. So they arrested the drivers and brought the truck back — with its contents in sorry shape. And that was not the exception but the rule.

The North Carolina women paid Majesty Moving \$7,000 for a move they were told would cost \$1,500. They waited more than a month for delivery, and when the truck arrived they couldn't believe what they saw.

The movers strapped their boxspring to the outside of the truck all the way from California to North Carolina. Now it was moldy. Their other belongings didn't fare any better. Sylvia held up pieces of a table and pulled a shattered TV out of a box.

The New York couple, after four months of persistent pestering, got the Department of Transportation to intervene. Finally Ameri Van Lines agreed to deliver their goods and honor the original estimate. Still, it didn't feel like much of a victory.

"It kills me to do that because now I'm going to pay them \$1,600 and that's going to put gas in their truck so that tomorrow they can go to somebody else's house and rip them off," says Jonna.

And what did they get for their trouble? Jonna points at their furniture. Everything that had legs is basically broken. And their trust is broken, too.

Do any of these people feel that they bear any responsibility in being scammed?

"Yes and no," says Bridget. "There were things I could have done differently, but I didn't ask for this."

"It's not just that we were naive or kind of dumb or new to it," says Sylvia. "They're good."

Just how good are they, and how often does it really happen? 'Dateline NBC' decided to try our luck with our own hidden camera moves.

STORY [Read Part 3: How vulnerable are consumers?](#)

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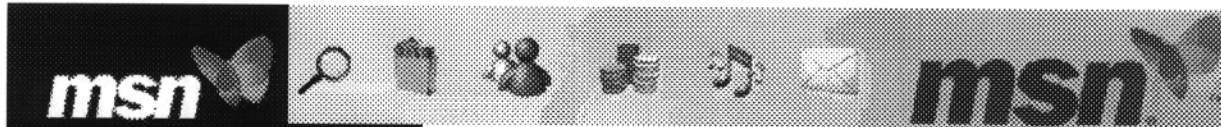
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DATELINE NBC

How vulnerable are consumers?

'Dateline NBC' puts movers to the test with hidden camera

NBC News
NBC NEWS

Jan. 17 — Just how vulnerable are consumers when they move? We decided to find out. 'Dateline NBC' rented two apartments, one in Raleigh, N.C., and another in Fairview, N.J. Our plan was to move from North Carolina to New Jersey and then back, with boxes full of knickknacks, clothing, and furniture we bought at thrift shops.

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Victoria Corderi
NBC CORRESPONDENT

FIRST, WE WENT the traditional route, right to the yellow pages, and called a national, established moving company for an estimate.

A Mayflower sales agent came to our apartment and made a detailed inventory. Mayflower's estimate was \$1,572.05.

Then we turned to the Internet to compare prices. We visited several sites and filled out inventories. It's all done online and over the phone. No one comes to your home to see your belongings before giving you an estimate.

Several companies responded with bids, ranging from \$780 to \$1097. That's hundreds of dollars less than Mayflower's estimate. So it seemed there could be a significant savings by shopping on the Web.

For our first move from North Carolina to New Jersey, we decided to hire Move-at-Once, one of the Internet movers. The company is new and it had no history of consumer complaints. Their estimate was \$914, right in the middle range of the Internet bids.

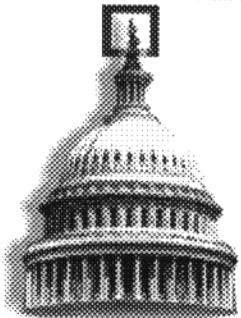
When he arrived, the mover told us we'd get the final price after he loaded our belongings.

"If you have more items, it's more money," the mover said. "If it takes more space in the truck, it's more money."

According to the law, if he thinks we have substantially more, he's supposed to give us a new price. He didn't. But in the end we weren't grossly overcharged. We paid only \$163 more than the estimate for extra cubic feet and packing materials.

Move-at-Once showed up within the three to five day time frame they promised. There were no additional charges and everything arrived in good condition. So we were pleased, particularly because we saved

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ourselves one third of what it would have cost with a traditional mover. Then we decided to move back to North Carolina — and that's when the real problems began.

This time we selected Adam Moving, another Internet company. It has a history of consumer complaints. We wondered if they would give us anything to complain about.

Adam Moving estimated over the phone that our belongings weighed 2,500 pounds based on the inventory we provided. Their price was \$1125, with no extra charge for fuel, tolls or mileage. It all sounded pretty straight forward — until moving day, when before long we weren't sure which end was up.

PAPERWORK AND DOUBLETALK

Moving? Check out these tips

- Make plans well in advance. Leave enough time to have movers come to your home and give you a detailed in-home estimate. Contact several movers and compare prices and services.
- Make sure the mover you select is licensed and insured by checking the Department of Transportation Web site, and check the Better Business Bureau rating.
- Check references. Try to get a first-hand recommendation from someone who has used the mover.
- Make sure you receive and read "Your Rights and Responsibilities When You Move." Reputable movers will provide this when giving in-home estimates.
- Never sign blank or incomplete documents, especially addendums, and make sure you understand anything you sign.

We were bombarded with paperwork. Then came an onslaught of numbers, oddball mathematical calculations and unexpected charges.

For instance, "Seven cents per pound, per flight," said the mover. That equals \$250 for stairs.

"0.05 per pound per feet," said the mover. That's how much for the long carry from our door to the truck? And no amount was too small to tack on.

"Usually, the customer pays for the tolls," said the mover.

That was \$12 for tolls which, according to the estimate, were included. But we came to learn that no matter what the estimate says, on moving day, all bets are off. And mathematical doubletalk is the new name of the game.

"The first 2,500 is gonna be 0.45," said the mover. "If it's gonna be additional extra pounds, it's gonna be

0.80.”

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But this doubletalk is serious and can cost you. He’s talking about nearly doubling the charge for any extra weight. And that’s where they can really get you.

But he was willing to make a deal. He’d offer us a flat price based on the cubic feet.

In other words, how much space our belongings took up in the truck. That way he said we wouldn’t have to worry about paying more for extra weight.

“It’s better doing this one, okay,” said the mover.

But what they didn’t know is that we were one step ahead of them — and knew exactly how much our things weighed. Before the move, we loaded our belongings onto a truck, weighed it full and then empty. We wanted to see what kind of numbers game the movers might play with us.

They loaded the truck and sure enough, it was back to math class.

“The 300, 375 cubic feet, okay, I did a break down,” said the mover. “Wardrobe is 20, chinabox is seven... each cubic feet is eight pounds, ok? Cool, 8.2.”

Finally, after all the mind-numbing explanations, we got a price, a flat rate of \$1,746. They wanted us to pay \$600 more than the original estimate of \$1,125. Not only did that price not sound like a deal, but we knew for a fact that it wasn’t. Unlike other consumers, we couldn’t be confused into compliance. Remember, we knew how much our belongings weighed, and their price was too high.

According to their calculations, our load weighed more than 3,000 pounds. Not even close — that’s a whopping 2,000 pounds more than what it really weighs. Our scale read 1,060 pounds.

So we asked them how they came up with that weight. And the games began again, with more cockamamie calculations.

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We had no clue what they were talking about, but we did know it wasn’t a very good explanation. The truck should have been packed tightly

and stacked to the top in order to get an accurate measurement of cubic feet. In this case, it was laid flat and packed loosely. No wonder their calculations were so far off.

So we told the foreman we wanted to have our things weighed to see what he would do. No surprise, he tried to dissuade us from going to a weigh station, first by telling us there's a 2,500 pound minimum no matter what our load weighed, then by telling us we'd have to pay \$16 to get it weighed.

"By the way, you gonna pay for the, for the weight, okay," said the mover.

Then he called his boss.

"You have to charge her one hour," he was told.

"How much for one hour, \$96 or \$125," the mover asked.

"\$98," he was told.

So now we'd have to pay more than \$100 to have our things weighed. We don't think so. According to federal law, it's not supposed to cost anything. The mover kept the pressure on.

"The way I look at it," said the mover, "better go with the flat rate."

We finally agreed to the flat price to see where it would take us."

The truck pulled away and later on we reviewed our paperwork, finding the movers had checked a box that made it appear we had agreed to the price prior to loading, when in fact we hadn't. Consumer advocates tell us that's a trick that allows movers to claim later on that clients agreed to the inflated prices ahead of time.

In North Carolina, our delivery was five days later than originally promised and a different driver showed up, expecting to be paid in full.

But we told him we knew the law, that a consumer is only required to pay up to 10 percent more than the original estimate on delivery day. That's a law most don't learn about until after they've been ripped off. We called his boss at Adam Moving

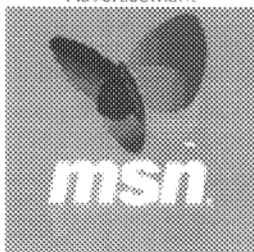
The driver was apologetic, but told us he had to leave with our things.

"Unfortunately, I'm an employee, and they're telling me to put your stuff in storage," said the mover. "I really do not want to do that it, but I don't have any choice here."

So he closed up the truck and drove away leaving us stranded, just like our victims. Then, a short time later, he reappeared saying he was just a subcontractor and couldn't go through with it.

"I don't want to be involved in this," said the mover.

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He accepted what we were willing to pay and delivered our things. We were lucky, but many others aren't. So we tried to find out why some household moves have become such a high stakes gamble.

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What does the law say?

'Dateline NBC' goes behind the scenes and behind the laws

NBC News
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Jan. 17 — 'Dateline NBC' spoke with a woman who worked for three months on the inside as part of a scam moving company. She says she's afraid of her old employers, but wants to expose the scam.

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Victoria Corderi
NBC CORRESPONDENT

“THEY’RE VERY NASTY, very mean,” says Diana. “They’re not business people... their motto is, you know, ‘sell ‘em your mom if you have to. Tell them exactly what they want to hear. Once we get their goods, it’s all up to us.”

She says it’s a free for all, not just with prices but with goods too, that employees routinely helped themselves to customers’ belongings.

Diana: “DVDs, CDs computers. Anything they can get their hands on.”

Victoria Corderi: “Sounds like a candy store.”

Diana: “It is for them.”

Corderi: “Why are they so unafraid?”

Diana: “Would you be afraid if you kept getting away with scams?”

So why are some Internet movers getting away with it? The problem started in 1995 when the federal government disbanded the agency that oversaw the moving industry. The Department of Transportation’s Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration handles things now and the problem of unscrupulous movers is a low priority. Critics say it’s a perfect environment for dishonest movers.

“The companies are certainly cognizant now that there’s no oversight and that if you want to rip people off, it’s relatively safe to do that within this context,” says Wendy Wienberg, a consumer advocate who’s testified before Congress about fraud in the moving industry — fraud that the government is well aware of.

“It’s outrageous,” says Weinberg. “It’s outrageous that we continue to put up with it and it’s outrageous that continually consumers are harmed to this extent.”

A 2001 GAO report and a follow up bluntly criticized the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration as ineffective and inadequate.

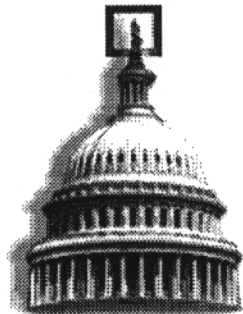
And two congressional hearings, in 1998 and again in 2001, found the same problems.

Corderi: “You said pretty clearly in the hearings last year, ‘why are we tolerating fraud in interstate moving?’ And what was the answer you were given?”

Weinberg: “There was no answer, there was no response, they haven’t done anything.”

Corderi: “But that’s a strong charge. You’re saying that the government is tolerating fraud. Do you see it that way?”

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Weinberg: "I do see it that way. It's not a secret. But there's been no change in the law, there's been no response from Congress."

We repeatedly asked officials of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration to talk with us. They declined. They sent us a letter saying it "is a safety agency... and... although consumer-related issues cannot be our primary focus, we are doing what is practicable given the agency's finite resources... the agency's mission is to reduce the number of highway crashes involving large trucks and buses."

Moving? Check out these tips

- Make plans well in advance. Leave enough time to have movers come to your home and give you a detailed in-home estimate. Contact several movers and compare prices and services.
- Make sure the mover you select is licensed and insured by checking the Department of Transportation Web site, and check the Better Business Bureau rating.
- Check references. Try to get a first-hand recommendation from someone who has used the mover.
- Make sure you receive and read "Your Rights and Responsibilities When You Move." Reputable movers will provide this when giving in-home estimates.
- Never sign blank or incomplete documents, especially addendums, and make sure you understand anything you sign.

So we went to the only government person willing to go on camera, the chairman of the House Highways and Transit subcommittee, which is supposed to oversee the moving industry. Wisconsin Rep. Tom Petri headed the two hearings that so far haven't resulted in any action from Congress.

Corderi: "What's it going to take for a change?"

Petri: "It's going to take a majority of the House and Senate to vote for legislation to put effective remedies in place. Hopefully we'll get something done, but we're working on it. That's the best I can say."

Corderi: "Well you know a lot of people listening to that who have been ripped of would say that's not good enough."

Petri: "It's not good enough, but it's better than nothing."

Petri says this issue is not high on anyone's agenda in Congress. Right now federal law does not enable the government to force moving companies to return consumers' money or goods, nor does it allow the states to use their own laws to crack down on bad movers. The solution supported by many is to pass

legislation allowing states to do just that. But the moving industry lobby is against it, arguing legitimate movers would be deluged with paperwork and crippled if they had to comply with each state's diverse consumer protection laws.

KNOWING YOUR RIGHTS

So right now, says Congressman Petri, consumers need to protect themselves with a pamphlet from the Federal Motor Carriers Web site: *Your Rights and Responsibilities When You Move*. Movers are required by law to provide it, but many don't. It's supposed to be a blueprint for a good move. But just try to find it.

Moving links

Click for information

- American Moving and Storage Association
- Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration
- Check mover license and insurance information
- Better Business Bureau
- Moving Advocate Team
- MovingScam.com

Corderi: "First of all, you would have to know to go to the the Federal Motor Carrier's Web site and most of American wouldn't even know what a Federal Motor Carrier is."

Petri: "Right."

Corderi: "Then you would have to

download this big, thick..."

Petri: "Right"

Corderi: "Small print, very difficult to read document."

Petri: "Right."

Corderi: "Which may leave you more baffled than when you started."

Petri: "It probably will."

Corderi: "So this is the answer? What good is this?"

Petri: "This is what the federal government has done to date. That's why we're talking about trying to give authority to the states."

There's a phone number listed on the pamphlet to call if you have questions. It doesn't work.

Corderi: "What the heck does that say?"

Petri: "It says that you better not rely just on the government."

Corderi: "On whom can you rely? What are you supposed to do?"

Petri: "I would recommend checking people out."

Corderi: "We talked to consumers who got ripped off even though they did do research."

Petri: "Right."

Corderi: "If they

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can't turn to the government and they've done their work, what are they supposed to do?"

Petri: "Right."

Corderi: "It's not a rhetorical question. What are they supposed to do?"

Petri: "They're supposed to get better recourse in place, and that's what we're working on."

WHAT DO MOVERS SAY?

In the meantime, what do the movers say? We researched the companies hired by the victims we met and found a trail of complaints and lawsuits alleging fraud, breach of contract, loss, damage, physical and emotional distress.

All of the movers declined on-camera interviews. One company, Majesty Moving, sent us a letter saying they "handle every complaint... seriously and strive to conclude... complaints in a professional and efficient manner."

But we wanted a full explanation from all the movers, so we decided to track them down. Most are based in New York and Florida, and the majority of them had similar responses. There were many doors closed.

The only one who was willing to speak to us on camera was Meir Hagbi from Adam Moving, the company 'Dateline' contracted with as part of our undercover move. We told him we had problems.

Corderi: "We were told lie upon lie, and we have evidence here because it was Dateline who was doing the move."

Remember, Adam Moving overcharged 'Dateline' and altered the paperwork to make it look as if we had agreed to their price ahead of time. When we showed him the undercover videotape, he had little to say.

He insisted our tape proved nothing. He would only admit that the movers were wrong when they told us we would have to pay to have our belongings weighed.

We told him we had had our belongings weighed beforehand, and no matter how he tried to justify the price with mathematical doubletalk — just as his employee did — the bottom line is that his company was 2,000 pounds off.

Hagbi: "First of all, I'm not off by anything because it's cubic feet."


Corderi: "We had our things weighed."

Hagbi: "It's cubic feet times seven. That's what

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you don't get."

Eventually he walked away, leaving many questions unanswered. He later called and said he fired the mover who had overcharged us. He sent a letter of apology and a \$250 check, and said his company makes every effort to resolve consumer complaints.







But most never receive such an offer, certainly none of the people in our story did. Right now, when it comes to moving, consumers might want want to heed the words of those who have learned the hard way.

Corderi: "How would you describe this entire episode?"

Emily: "Nightmare."

Sylvia: "Hell. Just horrible. Anybody's who's moving, oh my gosh, research like crazy. Ask people. Have them come to your home, and give you a legitimate estimate because they've seen your things, and they know where you're going and don't just go for the bottom line."

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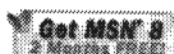
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