

Saving Money on Your Insurance

BY JOSE MONTEMAYOR

TEXAS COMMISSIONER OF INSURANCE

Speeding Up Your Homeowners Claim

EVEN IN YEARS without catastrophic hurricanes, hailstorms or tornadoes, insurance companies pay more than \$1 billion in Texas homeowners claims.

The claim process is never fun. But there are ways to minimize the hassle and maximize your chances of getting a fair settlement that fully restores your property.

Be Prepared

Periodically review your coverage with the insurance company to make sure you have enough. Be aware that your policy covers additional living expenses if you need to move out of your house temporarily until the damage is repaired. The policy also pays for debris removal.

Document your household items and other personal property so you can quickly and accurately prove any future loss to the insurance company. Make an inventory, including serial numbers. There are several home inventory computer programs you can buy at computer stores or download from the Internet. Photograph or videotape the interior of your home, including closets. Keep receipts, photos and videotapes in a safe deposit box or other secure place away from your home. Use the inventory to help decide if you have enough coverage on the contents of your home.

Act Quickly

Notify your agent or your insurance company's claim department promptly. If theft or other crime was involved, call the police.

Protect your house and belongings against further damage. Your homeowners policy will pay for emergency repairs, so keep receipts for any materials you bought. Don't attempt permanent repairs. An insurance company could deny your claim if you make permanent repairs before an adjuster looks at the damage and estimates the cost of repairs.

Meet with the Adjuster

Try to be present when the company's adjuster inspects the damage. You might be able to point out something that the adjuster overlooked.

It never hurts to have an estimate from your own contractor or even to have the contractor present. Roof claims after a hailstorm are a case in point. Some homeowners have complained that their insurers found no roof damage although their neighbors' insurance companies were paying for new roofs. Get a professional opinion from a roofer who can meet with your adjuster if they disagree.

You probably don't need a "public adjuster" to help with your claim. If you do hire one, be clear about the fee. Public adjusters generally charge a percentage of the money you receive from the insurance company.

Resolving Disputes

If you and the adjuster disagree on the amount of the estimate, talk with the insurance company to make certain nothing was overlooked. If you still disagree, your homeowners policy provides an "appraisal" process. You and the company each hire a damage appraiser. The two appraisers pick a third as umpire. An amount agreed to by any two of these three appraisers is binding on you and the insurance company.

An insurance company that denies a claim must explain why in writing. You have the right to complain to the Texas Department of Insurance. Call

1-800-599-7467

for a complaint form or file a complaint electronically at TDI's Web site,

www.tdi.state.tx.us.

You can call the same number or check out the same Web site for our consumer brochure, *Homeowners Insurance: A Guide for Texas Consumers*. ★

Editors:

- If you need further information, call: **Texas Department of Insurance Public Information Office (512) 463-6425**

We welcome your questions and suggestions about this column.