



Water quality notice leaves some confused

By Ivan Penn, Times Staff Writer

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Florida Water Works of Pinellas Park wants to offer you a free water quality test.

Just be warned: The offer comes with a high-pressure sales pitch for services and equipment that consumer protection investigators say are not worth the cost — as much as \$5,000 in some cases.

"We have 147 companies in this water conditioning equipment category," said John Zajac, a spokesman for the Better Business Bureau of West Florida. Over the last year, Florida Water Works, "they're No. 1 in complaints."

Florida Water Works has been sending mail solicitations recently to Tampa Bay area homeowners, offering the free program. Consumer protection experts say the company, which has been operating for more than 20 years, has long given people the impression they are affiliated with government, though they have no relation whatsoever.

"They've been around a long time doing the same thing," said Deborah Berry, of the Pinellas County Department of Justice and Consumer Services. "They're growing in wisdom in how to perfect their technique, to make sure that what they're doing cannot be considered violating any law."

Florida Water Works calls its solicitation effort a "State Wide Public Awareness Program."

"It is recommended by Florida Water Works that all Floridians have their water tested on a regular basis," the notice states. Then in fine print at the bottom of the mailer, the company notes "Florida Water Works is offering this as a public program and is not affiliated with a government entity."

Berry says the solicitation should not cause consumers to panic about their water. She said consumers should understand this is a private company marketing this program.

"The water is safe to drink," Berry said. "Of course, there are different things in the water, but it's not necessarily harmful."

Russell Glasscock, manager of Florida Water Works, says the company is no different than others such as Culligan. Their aim is to improve drinking water and protect consumers' homes by removing harmful chemicals that could damage plumbing.

"If they want a way to improve their water, we're able to help them out," Glasscock said.

Glasscock said the free water test is conducted by the company's inspection division, Environmental Quality Assurance. He said the test simply helps consumers know what's coming through their pipes.

"It's simply to bring awareness of the water," Glasscock said.

But Zajac said the high-pressure sales pitch often leaves consumers saddled with enormous debt for products and services they do not really need.

For example, in a March complaint, a Tarpon Springs woman told the BBB that the company sent someone to check her water and, "I believed he was from the city. He told me the water was bad," Zajac said, adding that the woman was convinced her water would harm her health.

The company pressed her to purchase a \$4,900 system that she ultimately did not believe she needed.

It became clear the company was not with the government. Government utilities send a water quality report to consumers once a year. And Tampa Bay area water has long been considered safe to drink.

Over the last year, Florida Water Works received 18 complaints and has five others pending. Pinellas consumer protection has received more than two dozen complaints in recent years about the company.

"There are good companies out there that don't generate complaints," Zajac said. "Eighteen complaints over the last year ... The next highest level of complaints is seven complaints. Some don't have any."

So here's the Edge:

- Contact your city or county utility. If you want a copy of your water quality report, it is available through your water utility for free.
- Purchase your own filtration system. You can improve the quality of your drinking water with a simple filtration system at a home improvement store rather than spending thousands.
- Seniors take caution. Berry, of the Pinellas consumer protection, says seniors should be particularly aware of these solicitations. She said seniors tend to be more trusting, are available during the day and generally have better credit, which makes them a target.

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18

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FLORIDA WATER WORKS

It is recommended by Florida Water Works that all Floridians have their water tested on a regular basis. Florida Water Works will have trained quality control technicians conducting these inspections **FREE** of charge in your area very soon. To take part in this important STATEWIDE AWARENESS PROGRAM, simply fill in the required information and send this card back today.

Note: Testing should be done even if water is run through a filter/softener.

How many adults in household? _____ E-mail _____
Day Time Phone: () _____ Best Time To Call A.M. ____ P.M. _____

FTM Z2 - 08/08/17

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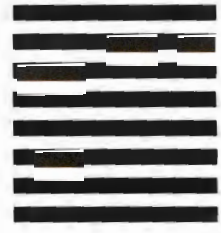
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