

## **DUST-UP OVER CARPET CLEANING SOLICITORS IN WHITE OAKS**

San Carlos Police responded to residents' calls on March 5 concerning aggressive door-to-door solicitors who were canvassing the neighborhoods selling a carpet cleaning service. Officers are investigating whether the company is unlicensed and, if so, it may be cited. They warn homeowners to be leery of any suspicious door-to-door salespeople since few legitimate businesses use this method to generate sales. And they suggested that homeowners call police immediately to check out any questionable solicitors.

The group that entered White Oaks was working in teams, with the advance team consisting of two young women whose job was to set up prospects. The women, wearing neck badges that gave a Fremont address, offered to deep-clean and shampoo one room for free as a way of demonstrating the service. When they gained entry to a home, they then called a team of two men to carry out the demonstration and to pitch the resident on having the rest of the house done for a "promotional" rate.

Police were summoned when the men refused to leave one home after staying there for more than an hour.

Officers say that articulate, clean-cut teenagers or young adults are often recruited by unlicensed or unscrupulous companies and then trained to be aggressive and persuasive. One familiar ruse is selling magazine subscriptions; the hawkers take the money but the magazines never arrive. Sometimes the sellers claim to be locals living in the neighborhood or working to earn points for a school project.

Recently, residents in Redwood City reported that door-to-door salesmen in that town recently canvassed neighborhoods purportedly to sell burglar alarms. If they were able to gain access to a house they would insist on "inspecting" all of the rooms.

Given the recent string of burglaries and car break-ins around White Oaks, anyone who is going door to door is able to determine which homes are empty and which homes are occupied – and should be regarded with suspicion. Security experts say that many burglaries occur during daytime hours, between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., rather than in the dead of night. San Carlos police say there have even been situations when neighbors have observed strangers carrying out belongings from a nearby house but didn't call authorities.

Also, scam artists have been known to carry identification that purports to be a business license or soliciting permit. These may look convincing – with a photograph of the solicitor and a number that appears to be a license. But the license or permit number may be completely bogus.

The best way to avoid being set up for a crime or fraud is to do no business with door-to-door solicitors and to indicate that they are not welcome in the neighborhood. Exceptions could be Scouts in uniform selling cookies. Also, evangelists are exempted from most laws under freedom of religion statutes.

Another reason to be wary of strangers going door-to-door is that they may be looking for mail to steal (for identity theft) or packages sitting on the porch. San Carlos police recently arrested three suspects in Redwood City on suspicion of stealing packages from San Carlos homes. They have recovered some of the stolen merchandise and are in the process of returning it. The lesson: If no one is home to receive packages, or if you cannot arrange to have a neighbor accept them, you might want to insist that delivery companies get a signature for personal delivery – or pick them up yourself at the Post Office or other delivery offices.

Law enforcement authorities say that to make sure your mail is secure, consider renting a mail box.

-- K.C.