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Marc A. Hebert's 'Money \$ense': Tips on filing homeowner's insurance claims

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WHETHER your home was damaged by a major storm or whether it has been spared, it is important to know what to do and what to expect when you file a claim for losses under a homeowner's insurance policy.

Assuming you have homeowner's insurance, now is the time to ensure you will be properly compensated in the event of a loss. If you've been paying premiums for years in preparation for a disaster, you will want to know what info you need to return your family's life back to normal in the event of adversity. You could save valuable time and potential headaches by considering the following suggestions:



Start before you need to file a claim. Understand the provisions of your policy and what it does and does not cover. Consider if the coverage is adequate and the types of coverage you might need.

For example, homeowner's insurance doesn't cover flood damage. If you need this type of coverage, now is the time to obtain it. Video or otherwise document the contents of your home and store the files in a safe place such as a safe deposit box or digitally on the cloud.

Filing a claim. Contact your insurance agent or company to report damages promptly. There could be time limits on the allowable period in which to do so. Confirm that your policy's terms cover the damages. Verify the deductible. If the loss is lower than the deductible, you may not want to file a claim. Obtain estimates for repairs. Ask how long it will take to process the claim.

Fill out claim forms. Your insurance company should send you all of the necessary forms. Fill out the forms that you will receive with descriptions of the damaged items, dates of purchase, costs, and replacement costs. Promptly returning the completed forms will avoid delays in settling your claim.

Report a crime. If there has been a crime, report it to the police. Get a copy of the police report and keep records of all the law enforcement officers you spoke with. Your insurance company may need this later.

Make temporary repairs. Photograph or videotape the damage, then take reasonable steps to protect your property from further damage. Keep damaged items to show them to the insurance adjuster. Save all receipts since your insurance company may reimburse you for the costs later.

Prepare for the adjuster's visit. Be prepared to show the adjuster the damage. Provide the adjuster with estimates of the repair bills. Show the adjuster your receipts and invoices for any temporary repairs you may have made. Keep copies of all documents.

How much you may get. This depends on the type of policy. Replacement cost policies provide you the amount needed to replace damaged items with one of equal quality. Actual cash value policies deduct depreciation from the replacement cost and then pay the remainder.

Temporary quarters. If you and your family have to live elsewhere until your home is repaired or replaced, your company may pay you for loss of use. Be sure to keep adequate records of these costs.

Water damage. Homeowner's policies don't cover flood damage but may cover other kinds of water damage.

Trees and shrubbery. Many companies will pay for removing trees that landed on your home but not those landing on your lawn. Destruction to shrubbery may also not be covered. Be sure to understand your policy.

Tax implications. Read IRS Publication 547, "Casualties, Disasters, and Thefts" on the IRS web site www.irs.gov to see if the damage qualifies as an itemized deduction.

Starting in 2018, you may claim a deduction for losses only if it occurs in a disaster that's declared by the president. This provision expires after 2025.

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