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Delaware business: State may require solicitors to have ID

Door-to-door crews rile some residents

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DOVER -- Ray Buchta has seen the door-to-door solicitors come through his Brandywine Hundred neighborhood, fresh-faced young people hawking magazine subscriptions and security systems.

So have his neighbors. And their concern about those solicitors, out-of-state crews that sometimes misrepresent themselves as local students, has prompted legislation that would require door-to-door salespeople to "prominently display" a special state identification card.

That card would show the person's name, employer, employer's telephone number, address and Delaware business license number. It would be issued by the state Department of Finance.

"There's no way to authenticate these people," said Buchta, president of the Chatham Civic Association.

That's what Rep. Bryon Short, D-Highland Woods, wants to address with House Bill 317.

Out-of-state crews peddling magazine subscriptions, household cleaners and the like are "very, very skillful at misleading the residents there," Short said.

Short said that, in one development, a magazine salesman posed as a friend of a young person who lived in the development as part of his sales pitch.

"They obviously lie and mislead the residents," Short said.

Posing as a local student is a standard ruse for traveling magazine salespeople, known as "mag crews."

Young people pack into vans and travel from state to state, peddling magazine subscriptions for agents who forward the orders to publishers.

According to the Web site travelingsalescrews.info, which has archived news stories, conviction records and other data on the trade, there have been more than 300 felony cases and 86 documented deaths associated with traveling sales crews.

Some of the deaths were of the salespeople themselves, including a 1999 van crash in Janesville, Wis., that killed seven young salespeople.

Traveling salespeople also have been convicted of murders, rapes, burglaries and assorted other crimes.

Checking alarms

"We've always had problems [with sales crews]," Buchta said. "It was really bad, I want to say two summers ago. This alarm company had college kids going door to door and asking, 'What kind of security system do you have?' -- and depending on the answer they'd say, 'Can I come in and take a look at it? You might need an update.'

"Definitely something needs to be done, because there's no way to verify a legitimate business," Buchta added. "They're going door to door in our nice neighborhood. You don't know whether they're coming back later to steal something."

Charles Landry, a Hampton Road resident, has the same objections.

"We've had incidences over the past few years of outsiders being either trucked in or bused in to go door to door for a variety of reasons," Landry said.

"We have a lot of elderly people in our neighborhood, people who live alone who've been very upset at this," he said, adding that Short's bill could help "weed out the people who are coming around either trying to look for an easy target for theft later on or run a scam."

Short, whose bill was crafted with the help of the Council of Civic Organizations of Brandywine Hundred, exempts people soliciting for nonprofit organizations.

The legislation also prohibits door-to-door sales before 9 a.m. or after 7 p.m.

Violators would be fined \$75 to \$100 for the first offense, and \$100 to \$250 for each subsequent offense.

The bill has been assigned to the House Economic Development, Banking, Insurance and Commerce Committee.
