

Seniors Home Supports Program (SHSP)

Hiring a Contractor Workbook



So you want to do some renovations or repairs to your house? Where do you start? And how can you be happy with your choice?

Adapted from a resource compiled by SEESA (South East Edmonton Seniors Association)

Definitions

Using a common language is the very first step in ensuring you are getting what you want done. Here are some definitions to assist in making sure you and your contractor have a common understanding of what you are looking to have done:

Having the right words—even if you know very little about home repair will make a contractor think twice before trying to pull the wool over your eyes. For example, if I phone someone and ask for a quote to shingle my ceiling - the contractor might also suggest that for a small extra fee he would be willing to top up my light bulb fluid. If I phone and ask for a quote to replace the shingles on my roof - the next question would be would you want us to look at the fascia, and eaves troughs (a far more reasonable question) If you aren't sure what fascia and eaves troughs are - don't panic refer to the diagram at the back of this workbook.

Renovation (Reno) - a distinct redesign of a space - usually involving major structural change to a space. This could involve moving walls, replacing cupboards, replacing bathroom fixtures such as tubs and toilets. A renovation is usually done for one of 2 reasons 1. To drastically increase your property value - or to enable you to age in place (to support assistive devices, like a walk-in tub etc).

Repair: Fixing or replacing existing non- structural elements for example, repairing or replacing taps, or a damaged toilet (but changing nothing else in the bathroom), replacing a tattered carpet or flooring etc. If you are having something repaired, you are simply repairing or replacing that “thing” you are not changing the look or design of the space.

Further discussion: The line between repair and reno can be fuzzy - think carefully about which you are asking for. Generally, a renovation congers up images of a major project—where repairs are a fairly quick in and out kind of job for a contractor.

Gutters: Gutters and eaves troughs can sometimes be used interchangeable (culturally specific) so be sure to clarify. Gutters can also refer to the space where two pitches meet, and water or snow would run down the gutter (the natural trough formed between the two angles).

Eaves troughs are always just eaves troughs—the metal or plastic “gutters” that collect the liquid off your roof and direct it away from your house - your eaves may or may not drain directly into the City Sewer system, and depending on the age of your home it may be acceptable to maintain that system or you may have to discontinue that arrangement. Either you or your contractor can contact 311 to clarify which category your home falls into if it becomes an issue.

Hiring a Contractor Checklist

Job Type: _____

Notes:

1. Call your District referrals:

I. _____

Phone: _____

II. _____

Phone: _____

III. _____

Phone: _____

2. Ask friends & family for referrals:

I. _____

Phone: _____

II. _____

Phone: _____

III. _____

Phone: _____

Questions to Ask

Explain what your job is—be clear, big, small, medium, complicated, easy, - then ask if the contractor will do a job of that size.

1. Can they provide references

Thoughts/Red Flags

I. _____

Phone # _____

II. _____

Phone # _____

III. _____

Phone# _____

Do they Guarantee Sub's work?

2. How many jobs are they working on at the same time? _____.

3. Will they do the work themselves or sub-contract to others?

Yes _____ No _____ Maybe _____

Choose 3 contractors make appointments for them to come and estimate the job. If you live alone ask a friend or family member to be present with you.

i. Name: _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

ii. Name: _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

iii. Name: _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

Explain who you are and why you are calling. Explain the nature of your project - Be sure you know you are comparing apples to apples.

Questions for References:

1. Ask. What work did you have done?

Think— Is the job similar in nature and size to yours?

Yes _____ No _____

2. Were you happy with the results?

Yes _____ No _____

3. How was the contractor when you approached him with changes?

4. How were you charged for changes?

5. Did the contractor give you all the information you needed to make good decisions about your project?

Yes _____ No _____

6. Was the job on budget?

Yes _____ No _____

7. Was the contractor and his employees/subs polite and respectful of your home?

Yes _____ No _____

8. Is there anything I should be aware of if I hire this contractor?

Would you hire this company/person again?

You don't have to be specific –but perhaps the contractor doesn't work Saturdays, or has dietary issues, or just has personal behaviors that the person giving the reference found odd but doesn't know how to mention them.

11. Is there anything I haven't asked about that you think might be relevant?

Evaluating Written Estimates

Now you have 3 quotes (or more) - how do you evaluate them:

Price alone is not the best way to make a decision.
The lowest quote is not always the lowest cost.

Here are some tips to consider when looking at your estimate.

1. Has the contractor given you a complete written description of the scope of work they are proposing? Is it accurate?
2. Has the contractor provided you with a description of the type and quality of materials they would use to complete the job?
 - A) Are all the contractors using the same type and quality of materials?
 - i. Is it important?
 - ii. How does it affect the price?
 - iii. Why are the contractors choosing different materials (don't hesitate to call and ask)?
3. Are the project's start and completion days appropriate? Do the dates and times fit into your schedule?
4. Do you have a clear picture of where your money is to be spent?
 - A) How detailed are the quotes?
 - B) Does the estimate include a payment schedule or arrangements?
5. Has the contractor included any guaranties or commitments he made to you?

Trust your instincts and make sure you are choosing the contractor that is giving you what you are asking for.

Other Sources of Information About Your Contractor

Word of mouth always tends to be the most reliable source of information but other places to call if you have that nagging feeling that something just isn't right—or you cannot find a word of mouth referral are:

Professional associations or Unions—they may not have much information but if they do it may be valuable. If a contractor or service provider has had their credentials revoked, you may not want to hire them.

Yelp - www.yelp.ca—These are crowd sourced reviews—read them carefully sometimes businesses have friends flood yelp with only positive reviews, other times someone is clearly pressing their sour grapes. However, it is always an easy place to start.

Better Business Bureau - Again it is easy to lodge a complaint with BBB but there is very little investigation, or opportunity for the company to rebut a complaint. Check with the BBB but give the contractor an opportunity to speak to any BBB complaints lodged.

Chamber of Commerce - The Chamber is a member organization and may or may not have information on your contractor—but if they do have information this could prove to be useful. If your contractor is a member it shows a commitment to the business community. If your contractor is not, it probably means nothing especially in a large urban center where Chamber Members tend to be very White Collar.

Government of Alberta - <http://www.servicealberta.gov.ab.ca> - The government of Alberta will investigate and be consumer complains especially if they contravene the fair-trade act. Always a worthwhile call—if your contractor has been in front of a consumer affairs panel you probably want to avoid them.

Do's and Don'ts of interacting with your Contractor

1. If you have pets - it is always a good idea to secure them away from work being done. This way there cannot be accidental escapes from doors left open, nor will your animal accidentally ingest toxic materials or be accidentally injured. For example, the chemicals used to clean carpets are generally harmless to human beings (unless you lick your feet) but can be lethal to cats and dogs or any animal that grooms itself.
2. If there is work going to be done while you are not in the home set the boundaries. If it is work that is agreed to, that is fine, if surprises turn up—do you want to be notified before the contractor decides to make expensive changes or repairs?
3. Advise your neighbours that you will have contractors working and the general nature of the work being done. That way they can assure you about or alert you to activity they may see that seems inappropriate.
4. Remember— if you start a sentence with “Since you are here doing _____ would you mind just looking at this?” This is music to some contractor’s ears as they may feel you are giving them permission to extra bill you. Any additional service they provide, or task they undertake may cost you money - be very careful about asking for small additional tasks to be done. This is the contractor’s livelihood and he expects to be compensated for doing his job
5. You should not be expected to or offer your contractor and/or his employees refreshments, meals or even snacks. They are professionals doing a job and should supply their own food and refreshment. Offering and having the contractor take refreshments from you changes the nature of your relationship to one that may be more “familiar” than you want or more familiar than the contractor wants. Certainly, if they request water feel free to supply it. But do not feel obligated to offer refreshments

6. Bathrooms - if you have a contractor that is going to spend a substantial amount of time on a project you may need to consider how you are going to deal with this. Some contractors on long projects will make arrangements for contractor facilities—this may or may not work for your job and in your community.
 - A.) How far away is the nearest public restroom? This keeps strangers out of your home and bathroom facilities, on the down side you will be paying for bathroom breaks and may be extending the length of time the job takes.
 - B) Do you have an RV with a bathroom? If you want to keep strangers out of your home this is a reasonable alternative. Make sure you remove any valuables and you will have to make arrangements to drain the septic tank.
 - C.) Specify which bathroom in your home you want contractors to use—ideally it should be closest to a door or the most public bathroom in your home. Remove all your personal items and prescription drugs from this bathroom.
 - i) if the contractor is coming in from the outside—be clear about times that people are not welcome to come into your home. - meal times, nap times, when you are not home.
 - ii) if they are coming from outside try to make the path for them as construction boot friendly as possible - if they must remove boots to come and go this is more time and inconvenience for the contractor. Canadian Linen and other providers can supply you with temporary matting, or you can request the contractor see to this.
7. Communicate with your contractor. If this is going to be a long job setup a regular schedule of meetings, daily, weekly, monthly etc. Make sure you know how to reach your general contractor in case of emergency, but don't bother them with every little detail that is what your regularly scheduled meeting is for.
8. Take pictures!!! Take pictures before the job is started, and take pictures during construction ESPECIALLY if you have concerns. With digital cameras, it costs nothing to take lots of pictures, and if something goes wrong a picture is truly worth 1000 words.
9. WWW.Lawdepot.ca will let you create, or look at a standard contractor/homeowner contract—if you view it online it is free. If you want to download a contract or create a contract you will be required to sign up for the service.

Red Flags!!

Sometimes a contractor will do or say things that should give you pause, and you may want to check them out more thoroughly - or proceed with more caution.

1. "This offer expires today!" - This is meant to pressure you into a decision don't fall for it! Most quotes are guaranteed for 30 days - you need time to mull over your choices don't let anyone pressure you.
2. "You will get a rebate if we use your house as a model for our work." This is definitely a line - a contractor with a history will have a portfolio of work and references! Get more bids and make sure you are really being offered a lower price.
3. "I will give you a price just from looking" - Be very careful, ask about worst case scenarios, and contractor insurance. You don't want to have your bathroom ripped apart and hear "well we didn't anticipate... it's going to cost you more."
4. I don't give out contact information from past customers. Just run the other way. Anyone providing a service WILL be able to provide references. Check them out VERY carefully, ask good questions and listen carefully to the answers.
5. "A simple handshake will do." - Always get it in writing—for your protection and the contractors. If it is in writing there can be no dispute and if there is you have something to take to court. You don't ever want to be in a homeowner/contractor dispute without paperwork.
6. "I'll cut you a deal if you pay cash." - This is a risk for both you and the contractor, and may mean you cannot claim the job on your income tax, or pay for the job with supplement money. If you do decide to pay cash—make sure your "invoice" does not include "tax" (GST or otherwise). If your contractor is charging tax and asking you to pay cash they are probably pocketing the tax money, and you are really seeing no savings.
7. "You'll have to get the permits." There is a difference between a contractor permit and a homeowner's permit. It may be in your best interest to get the permits—work done on a home owners permit is more carefully inspected; however, you may want to call the permitting office. This contractor may not be licensed to work in your community OR have lost their license due to bad work and therefore cannot apply for a permit.
8. "For an extra fee, I'll give you a warranty." Guarantees are built into most contracts at no charge and cover the work for a specific period of time, usually 1 year. Do you really want to hire someone who is not willing to back up their work?

You have done everything right and it turned out all wrong. Now what?

It can happen. Life happens and sometimes the best contractor in the world will have a bad day, week, month or job. You can be assured you did everything right, but you can't control all the variables so now you have to deal with the issue.

1. Talk to the contractor first - explain your concerns, and lay out your expectations. Sometimes this will be enough and you and the contractor can come to an agreement. Be willing to accept a compromise, and be open to accepting some responsibility - perhaps your intentions were misunderstood, or complications created unforeseen problems that prevented your contractor (or any contractor) from completing the job to your satisfaction.
2. You have the right to fire your contractor - but make sure you have cause and you have documented your reasons. You have signed a contract and you may have exchanged money for services at this point. If you fire your contractor he may have cause to sue you if he feels the firing is unwarranted.
3. If the situation is not resolving suggest mediation. Mediation is a low cost effective way of reaching a resolution. Alberta Mediation and Restorative Justice centre 780 423 0896 can be a great resource for mediation, or assist you in finding a mediator.
4. You can hire an attorney - make sure you speak with a construction lawyer. You should get an initial consultation for free (30-60 minutes). After that lawyers' fees run between \$100-\$300 an hour, so you have to be REALLY committed to litigation before you go down this road.
5. Small claims court can give you a judgement against your contractor- although collecting is often difficult.
6. File complaints with the Better Business Bureau, SEESA and SAGE Home services, the provincial licensing board, the City of Edmonton permits department, Consumer affairs (contact your MLA—although do not expect your MLA to be able to get your money back they can however assist in making sure this doesn't happen to someone else). Write an online review - be factual, be honest, do not use libelous language - but remember you checked the reviews so will others and your negative feedback will speak volumes.
7. Call the Trouble shooter or your local media watchdog— They are flooded with calls but their attention is something your contractor does not want.

