

Tips for Selecting Disaster Restoration Contractors

One of the more common business inquiries at the Better Business Bureau serving Eastern Oklahoma is Fire and Water Restoration Firms.



While recovering from a fire or storm damage is never a pleasurable experience, selecting the right Restorer can greatly ease the burden of getting back on track. This month we interviewed John Esposito, the President of ESPO Fire and Water Restoration, for guidance on what to look for when selecting a restoration contractor.

BBB: John, If my home or business is involved in a fire, flood or other catastrophe, what should I do first?

ESPOSITO: Of course the first call should be to stop the damage, that is call the fire department to extinguish the fire, or your plumber if

you need help in turning off the water. Your second call should be to a Restorer who will be your advocate during the process. Often a call to an out-of-state or out-of-country insurance call center may not get the best results in the middle of the night.

BBB: I assume the average person has never hired a restoration contractor; how does one go about choosing a good firm?

ESPOSITO: Not to sound like an ad for the Better Business Bureau, but an accredited BBB business with an A or A+ rating is a good starting point. We are in our 20th year of accreditation with the BBB in Tulsa, and our A+ rating is a point of pride and distinction. Trade associations, like the Tulsa Apartment Association (TAA), the Building Owners and Managers Association, (BOMA), and others also provide referrals of restorers. Certainly a "track record" and commitment in the community is important. Insurance is also often a differentiator among Restorers.
BBB: What insurance do you mean?

ESPOSITO: If not done properly, the restoration efforts can actually cause more problems than the original damage. For instance, if water is not properly dried, mold will ensue. The cost to remove the mold could be several times the cost paid to (poorly) remove the water. Restoration Contractors should carry not only general liability, but also pollution (mold, asbestos,

etc.) liability, and if they are providing testing or consultation, they should also carry professional errors and omissions insurance. If you ask the fly-by-night restorers for insurance, they may hand you a copy of their automobile liability coverage.

BBB: It seems like if there is 4 inches of water on the floor, getting bids for the work could delay things.

ESPOSITO: You are exactly right. But under an insured loss bids are not really important. The insurance companies pay based on usual and customary rates, and all Contractors agree to work under those rates. There is really no reason to obtain competing bids, in fact, one bid substantially lower than another generally means something was left out of the scope of work.





BBB: You mentioned mold, is mold a big concern?

ESPOSITO: Mold growth in a structure that has been water damaged is a very big deal. Home sales are held up or even reversed and commercial properties are losing tenants from moldy environments. Mold needs three things to grow: organic materials like wood or paper, a moist environment, and warmth. Regardless of whether it is from sewage overflow, the fireman's suppression water, or a roof leak, if we inundate an occupied building with water, all three conditions are present and the mold will begin to grow. However, if structural drying is conducted promptly, the mold growth will be stopped before it becomes a significant problem. But if the structural drying is not conducted according to the standards, mold will grow, and if the growth is substantial, the mold will impair the air quality even after the structure eventually dries. And always check with your insurance company first.

BBB: What are these standards you've mentioned?

ESPOSITO: ANSI, the American National Standards Institute, has two final and two draft standards for water damage restoration, mold remediation, and mold investigation. ANSI S500 is the professional standard for water damage restoration. This standard establishes three categories of water contamination and four classes of the component drying ability. It establishes the consensus approach for dealing with an issue, in this case dry-

ing a structure damaged by water. ANSI S520 establishes the professional standards for mold remediation. The two draft ANSI standards do not yet have numbers, but they address the assessment of structures for existing or potential mold. These standards truly define our business, and ESPO is unique in that our technical director is a member of the ANSI/IESO mold editorial committee and a voting delegate for the standards: we provide national direction in the industry, while many of our competitors do not even know of the Standard, let alone comply

BBB: What are the specific requirements?

ESPOSITO: Both of these standards are books an inch or more thick filled with specific requirements. But as an example, in both S500 and S520 an Indoor Environmental Professional (IEP) is required to make certain quality assurance tests under certain scenarios. While this IEP is only defined in the standard as an individual with the education, experience, and credentials to conduct the testing, States that license the IEP require professional certifications such as a professional engineer or certified industrial hygienist. ESPO Fire and Water Restoration is the only restoration firm in Oklahoma with a full-time CIH on staff.

BBB: This is really beginning to sound sophisticated.

ESPOSITO: When we started in the restoration business 28 years ago, water mitigation was conducted by carpet cleaners. But today it is no longer child's play; it's a very specialized science. We certainly encourage someone facing a disaster cleanup to get professional assistance in a timely fashion. At ESPO we sincerely hope that you never need our services. But if you find yourself facing recovery from a disaster, know we stand ready to provide support on a 24/7 basis from our offices in Tulsa and Oklahoma City, and we hope we can ease some of the burden for you.

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with it.