



Consumer protection goal of new state agency

A consumer buys a \$300 dishwasher and later learns his repairman won't honor his warranty. What does he do?

With the creation of the Consumer Protection Division of the State Justice Dept., Nebraska consumers now have a state office where they can file complaints.

According to Jerold V. Fennell, director of the new division, its purpose is to aid people who have not been helped before, by responding to uninvestigated, allegedly fraudulent activities.

42 complaints

Made possible by the Nebraska Uniform Deceptive Trade Practices Act, the division has handled 42 complaints and awarded six settlements in one month. Fennell said he expects about 200 complaints

each month after consumers become familiar with the division.

The 28-year-old graduate of Washburn School of Law in Topeka, Kan., Fennell, a former Omahan, said law enforcement officials haven't yet successfully responded to white-collar crime victims or white collar criminals. He said victims of white-collar crimes, such as warranty disputes, psychologically suffer more than victims of other crimes.

Fennell said the division will contact an accused company for records to see if any other illegal business has been transacted.

The only complaints Fennell and his staff have turned down so far have been those concerning high prices.

"As long as fraud isn't involved, businessmen can raise prices," he said.

Works with businessmen

Working not only with consumers but with businessmen as well, Fennell, who previously worked for the Kansas Consumer Protection Division, said the Nebraska Better Business Bureau has helped by alerting the division to fraudulent practices.

Fennell, who collaborates with the state ombudsman, said if there is an unfair statute, the division will respond to the consumer's need by providing a remedy.

He said he is trying to recruit University of Nebraska law students to investigate what is available to consumers concerning statutory remedies for fraudulent practices.

Varner: harmony needed in the arts

Coordination, consolidation and cooperation are key words to improving the arts in Nebraska, said NU President D.B. Varner.

"It is difficult to develop outstanding programs with the available resources. Perhaps with more cooperation and a combination of resources, better programs could be developed," said Varner, board chairman of the Mid-American Arts Alliance.

The alliance is an arts organization supported by universities, private citizens and corporations in Nebraska, Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma.

Varner said a consolidation of efforts between Lincoln and Omaha could be especially beneficial, and could be extended throughout the state.

He suggested that one symphony theater group for both cities be formed, consisting of members from existing city symphonies and University students from both UNL and the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

A major objective of a joint symphony would be reaching more communities in the state, Varner said.

He added that although it is difficult to extend programs to western Nebraska because of distance, he thinks NU has that responsibility.

Biggest hindrance

The biggest hindrance in Lincoln is the lack of a large performing arts hall, Varner said. Although he said Kimball Recital Hall is a fine building, its seating capacity is limited.

The door receipts from Kimball, which seats about 850 people, would never pay for large groups such as the St. Louis Symphony, Varner said.

When the St. Louis Symphony has appeared in Lincoln, at least half of the bill has been paid by the Mid-American Arts Alliance, he said.

The alliance arts organization will not provide money for the St. Louis symphony after this year, he said.

Varner said there has been some talk of building a performance hall to be financed by community and University funds.

\$1 million

One donor has pledged \$1 million if other funds can be obtained, Varner said.

"Although I favor a combination of efforts to fund a venture like this, I suspect there are many who wouldn't," Varner said. He estimated the cost of a performance hall at \$10 million.

He cited several strong points in Nebraska's arts programs.

"Joslyn and Sheldon are both fine museums with good managements," Varner said, adding that he thinks the visual arts are Nebraska's strongest arts program.

Impressed

"I'm very much impressed with Lincoln campus musical groups," he said. "What I've seen of the theater is also very good."

He said the state is shortest in dance and theater programs, and outside of Lincoln and Omaha, in symphonies. Varner said he thinks most communities have supported art programs and would favor further development.

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