

Pat Cuccaro: Public insurance adjusters help protect the consumer

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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As elected officials prepare for the coming legislative session, their focus will rightfully be strengthening and rebuilding Florida's economy.

Vital to a stronger economy are consumer protections that keep our businesses and homeowners thriving. Specifically, we must uphold insurance protections for commercial and residential property owners so that if a hurricane, tornado, sinkhole or other disaster strikes, they can quickly recover their losses and rebuild.

One of the most important of these protections for property owners is the public adjuster, who helps property owners through the often-complicated claims process to ensure they receive the coverage as outlined in their policies. In difficult economic times, public adjusters can be the safety valve that ensures consumers are properly paid for their insurance losses.

State studies in recent years have proven the value of the public adjuster to consumers. OPPAGA (Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability) reports released in 2009 and 2010 found that policyholders who used public adjusters received much higher compensation on claims than those who didn't use an adjuster at all, or who relied exclusively on the adjusters hired by their private insurers — whose job it is to look out for the interest of the insurance companies that employ them.

OPPAGA also concluded that complaints and regulatory actions against Florida's public adjusters are relatively low, and that Florida's public adjuster laws are comparable to — and in some cases more restrictive than — those of other similar states.

Yet much misinformation has been spread about public adjusters in Florida, more than 500 of whom are members of the Florida Association of Public Insurance Adjusters and thus are guided by a strict set of ethics and guidelines. In most cases, the tales of fraud and delayed claims are being spread by private insurers whose first priority is their bottom line, not property owners' fair claims payouts.

The public adjuster's sole responsibility, on the other hand, is to advocate for the policyholder's position in the claim. The public adjuster measures and documents a policyholder's loss on behalf of that policyholder, transferring much of the burden of the claim process and helping to document all losses to the insurance company adjuster.

In the vital 48 hours after disaster strikes, the public adjuster provides immediate claims handling assistance to the insured. We help the policyholders fulfill all obligations placed upon them by the insurance policy conditions, helping them to preserve evidence such as damage photos. The public adjuster provides direction as to new temporary living arrangements and can help secure for the property owner an advance payment from their insurance carrier, thus easing the financial burden of unforeseen expenses.

Bottom line: Public insurance adjusters serve the consumer. The consumer is better off when public adjusters are an option.

On behalf of the Florida Association of Public Insurance Adjusters, representing some 500 public adjusters statewide, we are committed to policies that protect consumers while promoting integrity and accountability within the industry.