

What You Should Know About Auto Repair Shops

The Law

According to DC Licensing Law 47-2851, all mechanics in the District of Columbia must be certified by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) and licensed to do business in DC. DC law requires auto repair shops to post their licenses and Certificates of Occupancy in highly visible areas.

Follow these suggestions:

- Ask for a written estimate.
- Approve any repairs before they are made.
- Approve any repair charges that exceed the written estimate.
- If you choose, ask that old parts be returned to you.
- Get an invoice detailing the work (parts and labor) done on your vehicle.
- Refuse to pay any charges that exceed the written estimate, unless you approved them.

Estimates

Get a written estimate before the shop performs any work. The written estimate prohibits the repair shop from changing the price it quotes for the work. (Find out ahead of time if you will be charged for the estimate. After you get an estimate, you may want to go to another shop for a second opinion.)

Any estimate you get should give:

- A list of the work to be done;
- An estimated completion date/time; and
- An estimate for the price of labor and parts. It is a good idea to find out whether you will be charged a “book” (flat) fee or an hourly rate (only for the actual hours worked).

Guarantees

Many shops guarantee some of their repairs. If the shop offers a guarantee, make sure you get it in writing, with:

- The name and address of the repair shop or company making the guarantee
- What the repair shop or company agrees to do (for instance, repair or replace the failed part or refund your money)
- What you must do to have the guarantee honored (for instance, return the car to the shop or pay a service charge)
- The effective time period of the guarantee (for example, 90 days from the repair date)
- The items that are covered or not covered
- Whether the guarantee is prorated (adjusted for time or mileage)

If You Have a Problem

If you are not satisfied with the repairs, speak directly with the service manager. Keep these tips in mind:

- Know your rights. See Title XVI of DC Municipal Regulations (DCMR) and DC Licensing Law 47-2851 for information about the laws governing auto repair shops in DC.
- Be courteous and calm.
- Explain the problem accurately, and tell the manager what you think would be a fair settlement.
- If you are willing to negotiate, say so. In many disputes, neither party is 100% right.
- If the problem cannot be resolved to your satisfaction, tell the manager you plan to file a complaint.

Auto Repair Consumers: Points to Remember

- Before you choose a repair shop, take the time to shop around for one that is reputable. One of the best ways is to ask family or friends for recommendations.
- Be cautious about discount offers. You may be better off in the long run sticking with a single, reputable mechanic who knows your car well and will not perform unnecessary repairs.
- Call the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) at 442-4400 to find out if the shop and its technicians meet licensing or registration requirements. You may also want to look for evidence that the technicians are certified in special areas of automobile repair.
- Never sign a blank repair order. Make sure the written repair order says exactly what you want done on your vehicle.
- Get a written estimate. If the repair shop cannot give you a written estimate because it is not yet clear what the problem is, tell the shop to give you an estimate when it does find the problem—before it does any work. (Get a price estimate for the diagnostic work that the shop will do to identify the problem.)
- For costly or complicated repairs, try to get a second opinion from another shop.
- Find out whether the charge for labor is a flat fee or is based on the actual repair time.
- Keep records of all repair work done to your vehicle, including written estimates, invoices, names of the people involved in the repair transaction, and payment dates and amounts.
- Dealers' service departments routinely get notices about car defects from manufacturers. If your vehicle's problem is not covered by the warranty, ask the shop if the manufacturer has sent out a technical service bulletin (TSB) on this type of problem—before you have the repairs made. If there is a TSB, the repair may be free.

“Back Alley” Auto Repair Shops

Is there an unlicensed mechanic doing business in your neighborhood? If so, your neighbors—and the mechanic's customers—could be at risk. Illegal auto repair operations often take place in back yards, alleys and garages of private homes. Because the mechanics are likely unlicensed and may be untrained, the work they are doing may not meet acceptable industry safety standards. Further, these back alley operations may also be impacting the environment by improperly disposing of motor oil, fluids, or other waste products.

If you suspect illegal auto repair activity in your neighborhood, call DCRA at 442-4400 to report it.

The Latest Scams

- Engine-monitoring computers in newer cars have led to new fraudulent repair scams. If a mechanic tells you that the computer is causing car troubles, get a second opinion. It is unlikely that your computer will have a problem.
- A dishonest mechanic may try to charge you separately for items (and labor) that are all part of the same repair job. Getting a written estimate before you have repairs done, and getting a second opinion if the estimate seems high, are good ways to avoid this scam.
- Your car does not need to be repaired before it is broken or worn out. Although some things like hoses and belts should be replaced periodically before they break, your car's warning systems will give you plenty of notice before you need to replace them. Do not be talked into repairing or replacing parts that have not yet worn out.

How to File a Complaint

Call the D.C. Consumer Hotline at (202) 442-9828 or go to oag.dc.gov.

Save all your receipts. They may be helpful when your complaint is being reviewed.



Adrian M. Fenty
Mayor, Government of the District of Columbia
Linda K. Argo
Director, Department of Consumer and
Regulatory Affairs