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Problem Solvers Uncover Problems With Home Inspectors

Kansas City, MO-- You would assume that an inspector is there to let you know the real condition of your potential purchase. But the person you pay hundreds of dollars to share his honest opinion may not be telling you the whole truth. "From the outside... great. It was so cute." That's what Carol Hawkins says she thought when she moved to the area, and picked what she thought was a dream home. Her realtor gave her the name of an inspector who Hawkins chose to look at the house, and file a report. Hawkins told Fox 4 News' Nancy Lewis, "There was not one thing, Nancy, on that inspection that said to me, woah.. you'd better not buy this house. Nothing. The whole front of it... okay.. this is okay... This is okay... It was just okay okay okay." Carol bought the home.

Two weeks later, the city of Belton condemned it because of a red-tagged heater, sagging roof, and bad pipes. "A glorified cardboard box is what I was sold," says Hawkins. The report filed by a second inspector didn't find much of anything "okay" at the house. His inspection was twice as long as the original report. Hawkins says, "I bought the house based on what I thought was a solid, competent inspection. Had I known this was not a solid inspection report, I never would have bought that house."

Inspector, Norm Clark, says that happens all too often. The reason, he says, is twofold. First, Clark says is lack of training. Half of the states in the U.S. require inspectors to be licensed. Kansas and Missouri do not. A bill was introduced in the Missouri House two years ago, but failed. There is a voluntary licensing, the American Society of Home Inspectors. Those who join ASHI have to pass a competency test, and have to take twenty continuing education hours each year. But Clark tells Fox 4 there's a second reason inspections go wrong. He says, "So many of my compatriots out here have a dual loyalty, which puts them somewhat in conflict." It's true, says an unnamed source, who still works for an inspection agency. He learned on his last job the Inspector-Real Estate Agent bond is often close. Too close. "Absolutely. It's a marriage. It's a relationship that the two have. You give me good reports, and I'll give you business," he says. Bad inspections are what some agents call deal breakers. "Well, if a realtor gets a real lengthy inspection report and they don't like the wording they contact the company and say could you change the way this is worded. We don't like the way this is worded because it could cause our deal to fall through." He tells us inspectors who quote, "play the game," stay on those agent's lists, boosting their business.

Inspector Norm Clark says working with agents is the norm, but it's not the way it should be. Clark says, "I'm not here to protect the interest of the realtor, I'm not here to protect the interest of the mortgage holder I'm only here to protect the interest of the buyer." Clark tells Fox 4 he's so serious about that, he's joined the Independent Home Inspectors Association. There are only seven members in the Kansas City metro. Those who join have to put in writing that they will not solicit referrals from real estate agents. Clark says, "I don't play the game that way." Currently Massachusetts is the only state where agents are prohibited from recommending inspectors by law.

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Carol Hawkins says she wishes she would have known all this before she bought, but she was lucky. In response to a letter from her attorney, the realtor and owner gave her money back. Now she's in a new home. A home that was inspected by someone licensed. And someone she chose.. on her own. Carol Hawkin's inspector still claims he did an adequate inspection. Her realtor says she gave his name because she thought he was qualified, and says she'll never give his name out again.

If you'd like to find out which local realtors are members of that independent inspectors' assn., you can log onto the Independent Home Inspectors of North America website at www.independentinspectors.org or the American Society of Home Inspectors at www.ashi.com or call them at (800)743-2744.

Representative Bill Boucher originally introduced that inspector licensing bill, he's no longer in the house. So Fox 4 talked with Rep. Mike Sager from Kansas City. He tells us he will re-introduce that inspector licensing bill next session.

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