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Customers can reclaim clothes from evicted dry cleaners

More than 200 items left in business that shuttered in January, county says

by Amber Parcher | Staff Writer

Consumers who brought more than 200 pieces of clothing to an Aspen Hill drycleaners that has shut down can reclaim their wardrobe items through the Montgomery County government.

Shamrock Cleaners, at 13561 Georgia Ave., closed its doors in January after the owner filed bankruptcy in November. Since then, at least four former customers of the cleaners who were unable to retrieve their clothing filed complaints with county police and the Officer of Consumer Protection, which investigates thousands of complaints each year involving automotive sales and repairs, new home purchases, home improvements, credit issues, retail sales, internet services and most other consumer transactions. The department contacted the cleaners' property manager and the bankruptcy attorney to investigate.

In early May, investigators retrieved dozens of prom dresses, men's suits, evening gowns and children's clothes from the defunct drycleaners. Investigators lugged it all to their Rockville office and are now calling the telephone numbers on the customers' receipts and urging people to stop by to retrieve their items. Clothing that is not claimed will eventually be donated to charity.

"Most consumers had no idea that their goods were in jeopardy when they were left in the possession of the merchant," said consumer protection investigator Joy Matthews. "Unfortunately, drycleaners, photography shops and many other retail businesses may be going out of business more frequently in today's economy."

As a result, consumer protection employees are practiced in retrieving possessions for consumers. In 2008, the department paired with the county's sheriff's office, which issues eviction notices on behalf of landlords, to improve communication between the consumer protection office and the sheriff's department. Under the partnership, when sheriff's deputies evict a store that may contain consumer goods, they call the consumer protection agency, said Ralph Vines, an administrator with the consumer protection office's investigative program.

In 2008, the county's office of consumer protection and the sheriff's office won an award from the National Association of Counties for collaborating to help protect consumers from losing their possessions when stores are evicted.

Vines said the consumer protection department has also had success in negotiating with landlords who might otherwise dump the items left behind.

"Up until seven or eight years ago, if the sheriff changed the locks, the landlord could put the stuff in the dumpster," Vines said. Now, most property owners will allow the consumer-protection department to spend time taking over the items, even if the space is quickly being rented out again, Vines said. For example, the cleaning site that closed in January transformed into a sub shop by May.

Vines said the office of consumer protection would prefer that no business have to abruptly close, but with the sheriff's office and property owners, "we're making the best out of the worst situation."

Consumers who wish to retrieve their clothing from Shamrock Cleaners in Aspen Hill should contact the Office of Consumer Protection within 30 days at 240-777-3636 or via e-mail at ConsumerProtection@montgomerycountymd.gov.

For more information on Montgomery County's office of consumer protection, visit www.montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer.