

Essentials

[Search](#)
[Highlights](#)
[CyberSurveys](#)
▶ [News Talk](#)
▶ [Sports Talk](#)
▶ [Wings Talk](#)
▶ [Gear Talk](#)
[Horoscope](#)
[Lottery](#)
[Weather](#)
[Staff](#)

News

[Autos](#)
▶ [Joyrides](#)
[Business](#)
[Careers](#)
[Classrooms](#)
[Editorials](#)
[Metro/State](#)
▶ [Macomb](#)
▶ [Oakland](#)
▶ [Wayne](#)
▶ [On Detroit](#)
[Nation/World](#)
[Obituaries](#)
▶ [Death Notices](#)
[Technology](#)
[Voices](#)

Sports

[Sports Front](#)
▶ [Lions](#)
▶ [Pistons](#)
▶ [Shock](#)
▶ [Tigers](#)
▶ [Red Wings](#)
[College Sports](#)
▶ [U-M](#)
▶ [MSU](#)
▶ [State Colleges](#)
[High Schools](#)
[Motor Sports](#)
[Golf](#)

Glass shops accuse AAA of deception over repair options

By Megan Scott / The Detroit News

DEARBORN -- A group of glass repair shop owners is suing AAA Michigan and Harmon Glass, accusing the two of predatory practices in deceiving customers about what repair services they can use.

The lawsuit, filed by Jay Schwartz, a Farmington Hills attorney, alleges that Minnesota-based Harmon Glass, with AAA's consent, refers customers to its own glass repair shops in the area.

Schwartz, who represents 48 auto glass installers throughout the state, said that violates the Consumer Protection Act and the Uniform Trade Secrets Act.

"They are directing consumers without consumers knowing their options," Schwartz said.

The lawsuit claims that when a customer calls AAA with a glass repair claim, the call is transferred to a Harmon Glass customer service representative, who identifies the company as AAA. The representative then attempts to dissuade the caller from using other glass

[Scoreboards](#)

Features

[Features Front](#)

[Entertainment](#)

▶ [Casino Guide](#)

▶ [Movie Finder](#)

▶ [TV Listings](#)

[Comics](#)

[Comic Books](#)

[Detroit History](#)

[Food](#)

[Games](#)

[Health](#)

[Homestyle](#)

[Next!](#)

[Pets](#)

[Religion](#)

[Wine Report](#)

Advertising

[Cars.com](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[Personals](#)

[JobHunter](#)

[Model Homes](#)

[Place an ad](#)

[Home delivery](#)

repair shops for service, the lawsuit contends.

Harmon also tells some customers that other shops aren't authorized to install glass, according to the lawsuit.

"I don't know how I get my reputation back when (consumers) think AAA is telling them that I'm not authorized, and that their rates will go up. That's the crux of (our) lawsuit," said Bob Blackmer, president of Auto Ameristar in Westland.

AAA, headquartered in Dearborn, signed a contract with Harmon Glass in April to administer auto glass claims, according to AAA Public Relations Manager Nancy Cain. Cain said the decision was made in the best interest of consumers, and that since August, AAA's overall rate has decreased 5 percent because of it.

Cain said the AAA-Harmon Glass agreement allows customers to take their repair claims wherever they want. She said that over half of the people calling in already know what glass shop they want to use.

"We only make a recommendation if the customer doesn't know," Cain said. "We are not trying to steer anything. Our members like this program. We see this as a win-win for everyone."

But the other glass repair shop owners don't see it that way. They say Harmon Glass is a direct competitor.

They also contend that since AAA has used Harmon Glass, business at other repair shops has dropped by about 80 percent. One glass shop has gone out of business, according to Bill Farrah, president of Glass Choice, an organization of 100 glass shop owners in Michigan.

The shop owners complain that since the contract was signed, they've had problems getting authorization numbers from AAA and receiving payment for repairs.

Cain said a few shops may have had problems because of glitches in the new system, but that it was not widespread.

Schwartz will ask for an injunction at a June 22 hearing before Wayne Circuit Judge Isidore Torres to prevent AAA and Harmon Glass from making referrals only to Harmon Glass. He also wants AAA and Harmon to make up the financial losses of his clients. Schwartz said he has not determined yet how much that is.

"We want a level playing field," Blackmer said. "AAA of Michigan advertises they are your hometown company ... the people you can rely on. That was their advertising campaign. We feel sold out."

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◀ INDEX ▶