SCR-25 — Interstate Moving Hostage Extortion & Deceptive Freight Estimate Guide

A Complete Handbook and Web Resource for Relocating Families, Homebuyers, and Consumer Advocates

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Author: Mark Druckmiller, REALTOR®, Real Estate One (Saline / Washtenaw County, Michigan)

Consumer Defense: Halting Hostage Moving Rackets, Enforcing the FMCSA 110% Rule, and Vetting Interstate Movers

Executive Summary: The Moving Day Ambush

Relocating to a new home is one of life's most stressful transitions. Rogue interstate moving syndicates weaponize this vulnerability through an aggressive, extortionate racket known as **Hostage Freight Extortion**.

The scam operates through a calculated bait-and-switch:

1. **The Deceptive Lowball Estimate:** Operating behind rotating shell company names (e.g., Great Moving USA, Green Movers, New City Moves) and fabricated online review profiles, rogue moving brokers provide binding, low-cost estimates sight-unseen over the phone or internet. Families sign contracts believing they secured an affordable, full-service interstate move for $3,000.
2. **The Moving Day Ambush:** Once the family's furniture, heirlooms, and clothing are loaded into the moving van, the crew padlocks the truck doors and announces a massive price increase, claiming the load exceeded estimated cubic footage or weight. The price doubles or triples to $8,000 or $10,000.
3. **The Hostage Ransom Demand:** When the family objects, sales representatives cut off all communications. Moving crews refuse to unload the truck at the destination unless the family pays the inflated balance immediately in **physical cash, postal money orders, or certified cashier's checks**.
4. **The Extortion Threat:** If the family hesitates, the syndicate threatens that their belongings will be placed in an undisclosed storage facility, incur daily storage fees of $500, and ultimately be auctioned off or discarded.

In August 2024, federal authorities in Brooklyn concluded a multi-year prosecution (*United States v. Andre Prince et al.*) dismantling an enterprise that wrongfully extorted over **$3 million from more than 800 victim families**

nationwide. Internal Slack chat logs revealed company personnel exchanging memes laughing at frantic customers whose belongings were held hostage on moving day.

This handbook details federal rights under the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), the 110% Rule, how to distinguish carriers from brokers, and emergency law enforcement protocols.

Section 1: The Federal FMCSA 110% Rule (Your Primary Shield)

Under federal commercial transportation law administered by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), consumers have ironclad statutory protections regarding interstate moves:

The 110% Rule (49 C.F.R. § 375.407):

- **For Non-Binding Estimates:** An interstate motor carrier **cannot demand more than 110% of the original estimated amount at delivery** before releasing your household goods.
- **For Binding Estimates:** The carrier **cannot demand more than 100% of the binding estimate at delivery**.
- **The Law:** If a mover estimated $3,000 (non-binding), you are legally obligated to pay a maximum of **$3,300 (110%) at delivery** to receive your goods. The mover **must unload your belongings** upon payment of that 110%.
- Any remaining disputed charges must be formally billed and deferred for at least **30 days** through administrative claims.

Holding Goods Hostage Is a Federal Crime (49 U.S.C. § 14915):

- Knowingly holding household goods hostage for payment beyond statutory limits is a **federal criminal offense** carrying civil penalties of **not less than $10,000 per violation per day**, plus suspension of operating registration.

Section 2: Broker vs. Motor Carrier — The Critical Distinction

Understanding who you are hiring is the single most important step in avoiding moving scams:

Feature	Household Goods Motor Carrier	Household Goods Broker
Operational Definition	Owns trucks, employs drivers, and physically transports your goods.	An intermediary sales office that arranges transportation by selling your job to a third-party carrier.
Physical Equipment	Operates branded commercial fleet with USDOT numbers on truck doors.	Operates call centers; owns zero trucks; never handles your furniture.
Legal Liability	Federally responsible for loss, damage, and delivery schedules under the Carmack Amendment.	Frequently disclaims all liability once your contract is sold to an independent driver.
Pricing Risk	Provides direct estimates based on physical or visual video surveys.	Quotes artificially low prices to collect a non-refundable deposit, then leaves you at the mercy of rogue drivers.

Section 3: The 5 Red Flags of a Rogue Moving Operator

Watch for these warning signs when getting moving estimates:

1. **Sight-Unseen Phone Estimates:** The company gives you a firm binding quote based strictly on a phone conversation without conducting an in-home visual walk-through or a live video survey of your belongings.
2. **Generic Phone Greetings:** When you call their office, representatives answer with generic phrases like *"Moving Services"* or *"Relocation Department"* rather than a specific company name.
3. **Demands for Large Upfront Cash Deposits:** Demands large non-refundable credit card deposits or wire transfers before moving day. Legitimate carriers collect payment at delivery.
4. **Missing Federal Credentials:** The company's website lacks a valid **USDOT Number** and **MC (Motor Carrier) Number**, or fails to provide the mandatory federal booklet *"Your Rights and Responsibilities When You Move."*
5. **Brand-New DOT Authority:** Searching the company on the federal registry reveals their operating authority was granted less than 6 months ago, often hiding a history of reincarnated shell companies.

Section 4: The Relocation Due Diligence Protocol

Before signing a moving contract:

Step 1: Verify Credentials on ProtectYourMove.gov

- Visit the official FMCSA portal: **protectyourmove.gov**.
- Enter the company's USDOT and MC numbers.
- Confirm:
  - Is their Operating Authority **Active**?
  - Do they hold active **BIPD (Bodily Injury & Property Damage) and Cargo Insurance** on file?
  - Review their official **Complaint History** (hostage load complaints, deceptive pricing, delivery delays).

Step 2: Mandate a Written Binding Estimate

- Insist on a written **Binding Estimate** or a **Binding Not-to-Exceed Estimate** based on a physical inventory list.
- Ensure the estimate specifies:
  - Total cubic footage and estimated weight.
  - Guaranteed pickup and delivery windows.
  - Detailed list of all potential accessorial services (stairs, long carries, shuttle fees).

Step 3: Verify the Truck at the Curb

- On moving day, inspect the driver's truck before they load a single box.

- Does the USDOT number painted on the truck door match the company on your contract? If an unmarked rental truck (Budget, Penske, U-Haul) arrives with a crew demanding cash, pause the move immediately.

Section 5: Emergency Response Protocol — If Movers Hold Your Goods Hostage

If a mover padlocks your goods and demands extortionate fees:

1. **Enforce the FMCSA 110% Rule in Person:**
    - Offer payment of exactly 100% (for binding estimates) or 110% (for non-binding estimates) via certified funds.
    - Inform the driver that under **49 U.S.C. § 14915**, refusing to release household goods upon payment of 110% is a federal crime punishable by $10,000/day fines.
2. **Call Local Police (The Federal Statutory Angle):**
    - Call 911 or dispatch. When officers arrive, they may initially claim: *"This is a civil contract dispute."*
    - **Hand the officers the federal statute:** Provide a printed copy of 49 U.S.C. § 14915. Explain that federal commercial transportation law explicitly defines holding household goods for inflated charges as criminal commercial extortion.
3. **File an Emergency FMCSA Hostage Complaint:**
    - Submit an emergency complaint on the **National Consumer Complaint Database (NCCDB)** at **nccdb.fmcsa.dot.gov** or call **888-DOT-SAFT (888-368-7238)**.
4. **Contact the DOT-OIG and State Attorney General:**
    - File a complaint with the **Department of Transportation Office of Inspector General (DOT-OIG)** hotline (oig.dot.gov/hotline) and your State Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division.

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