

Alert from our own auto repair expert here at VDACS: please note nationwide distribution.

Connecticut Blasts Sale Of Fake Air Bag Covers August 23, 2005

The state of Connecticut is attempting to stop an Alabama company from selling replacement air bag covers without the air bags. Hicks Air Bag Covers markets its air bag covers nationwide as an inexpensive alternative to installing replacement air bags.

"Selling fake air bag covers is likely illegal under state law * and appallingly irresponsible under any standard," Attorney General Richard Blumenthal said.

"The company's products pose a particular danger to passengers and second-hand car buyers unlikely or unable to know whether an air bag cover is fake. The result is vehicular Russian roulette, with losers facing possible death or severe injury. Devices so clearly sacrificing safety should be stopped," Blumenthal said.

The attorney general, Sen. Leonard A. Fasano and the Auto Body Association of Connecticut (ABAC) also will push legislation imposing a total ban on the sale and installation of air bag covers without air bags. Florida, New York and other states have recently enacted similar laws.

Federal law prohibits auto repairers or dealers from installing air bag covers without air bags in vehicles whose bags have deployed. Current law does not cover individual non-professionals.

Once a cover is installed, a consumer many not know whether an air bag is underneath. One means of checking is to look for a manufacturer's logo, which is likely to be missing if the air bag cover is bogus.

"My office will aggressively seek to determine whether legal action against Hicks Auto Body is warranted. I will also work with Sen. Fasano, other lawmakers and the ABAC to fully ban the sale and installation of phony air bag covers and to institute tough civil and criminal penalties against those who endanger the public with this deadly deception," Blumenthal said.

"This is a major public safety concern, so I am hopeful that we can make Connecticut motorists aware of this dangerous practice. Right now, there may be citizens driving around who unknowingly purchased a used car whose airbag was not properly replaced," said Fasano.

"It is unconscionable that any company would install fake airbag covers and put motorists at risk simply to earn a few extra dollars. I plan to aggressively pursue new legislation that specifically prohibits the sale of these 'fake' air bags so Connecticut drivers can rest assured that their air bags function properly."

"I was shocked when I received an advertisement in the mail from this company," said ABAC representative Bill Denya, who owns a garage in Meriden. "As an auto repairer, my top priority is to fix vehicles so they are safe to drive. ABAC is always very concerned about safety issues. These fake air bag covers endanger public safety and should be outlawed."

"When buying a used vehicle, motorists should check for the maker's logo on the bag cover. No logo is a good indication that the cover is a fake, and there's no air bag underneath."

On its web site and in mailings to Connecticut auto body shops, Hicks Air Bags openly touts its product as a cheap substitute for new air bags in damaged vehicles. Its covers, which come in 50 colors and fit virtually every vehicle make and model, cost \$75 to \$85, compared with \$600 to \$700 for a new air bag.

"Expensive air bags not for you? Here's an affordable alternative to restore your car's interior without them," reads a Hicks Air Bags mailer recently sent to a Connecticut auto body shop.

Another piece of company promotional material reads, "Look good for less with our cosmetic, nonfunctional replacement covers."

In 2003, Hicks owner Lawrence G. Hicks pled guilty in federal court to selling counterfeit General Motors air bag covers to individuals, auto body shops and used car dealerships for use in repairing damaged vehicles.

Hicks admitted selling more 4,600 of the counterfeits in 1999 and 2000. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that air bags saved about 2,500 lives in 2003, the most recent year for which figures are available.

"Hicks Airbag Covers allows you to replace your blown factory airbag with low-cost non-functional covers at a fraction of the cost and hassle. We provide an affordable, good-looking interior for people who

Don't want an airbag for health or safety reasons Race their cars and can't have an airbag Sell auto interior products and want to showcase their products without expensive original airbags Don't want to put the cost of a repair airbag into an older model car

We probably have a replacement airbag (sometimes referred to as a dummy airbag or airbag cover) for your car. We've also put together the information you need to select the exact airbag replacement for your project, to receive it quickly and install it successfully".

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