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## good works

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philanthropy

# Call For Action

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**maybe** you've been ignored by a merchant when your new washer was damaged on delivery. Or you've battled with a travel insurer that refused to refund your tickets for a COVID-canceled trip. Know anyone who had trouble getting a disability placard from the Registry of Motor Vehicles? Has a relative been scammed by a telemarketer? Problems like these can be frustrating, even infuriating, and often costly.

It's not always obvious who to contact about consumer problems, or how. No one wants to waste time and energy calling, writing, or emailing businesses and agencies that often don't respond. Or maybe you finally reached a live person but they want documentation you didn't know you needed to prove your claim. Take heart: Trustworthy help is available thanks to a team of local volunteers.



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“Callers ask us for help with a wide range of problems. Available resources to assist them can be complex to negotiate.”

– Carolyn Koehler, CFA co-director

Call For Action (CFA) is a confidential, telephone-based consumer action line staffed by people who are experts in resolving consumer problems. The service is free. Part of a national CFA network, Boston’s highly skilled team works in space donated by WBZ-TV, their media partner since 1971. Boston’s CBS News affiliate also provides office supplies and six computer stations.

Over those 53 years, the CFA team has developed an extensive database of information and working relationships with senior level consumer ombudsmen at state agencies, national and international corporations, and major retailers. Their contacts are key individuals the average citizen isn’t likely to reach.

CFA co-directors Carolyn Koehler and Rosalie Snyder are both long-time volunteers, as are many of their colleagues, including several from Wellesley and Weston. Snyder, a former Wellesley resident, joined in 1985; Koehler in 1994.

“There’s a fairly stiff learning curve for volunteers,” said Koehler. “Callers ask us for help with a wide range of problems. Available re-

sources to assist them can be complex to negotiate. You also need to develop a feel for identifying what callers need, which may not be what they initially request.” Each case is assigned to the volunteer who answers a phone call, or is handed an email, as it comes in. Every volunteer is identified by a number, not by name, to insure privacy. But callers can ask for them by that number to get updates or further advice.

Currently, there are 14 women and one man on the team. That’s fewer than usual since the COVID-19 pandemic forced the station to close their office for two years. Without access to their database, they handled about 40 cases a week remotely. “Not perfect but people were grateful,” said Koehler. In past years, there were 20 to 25 volunteers on the team.

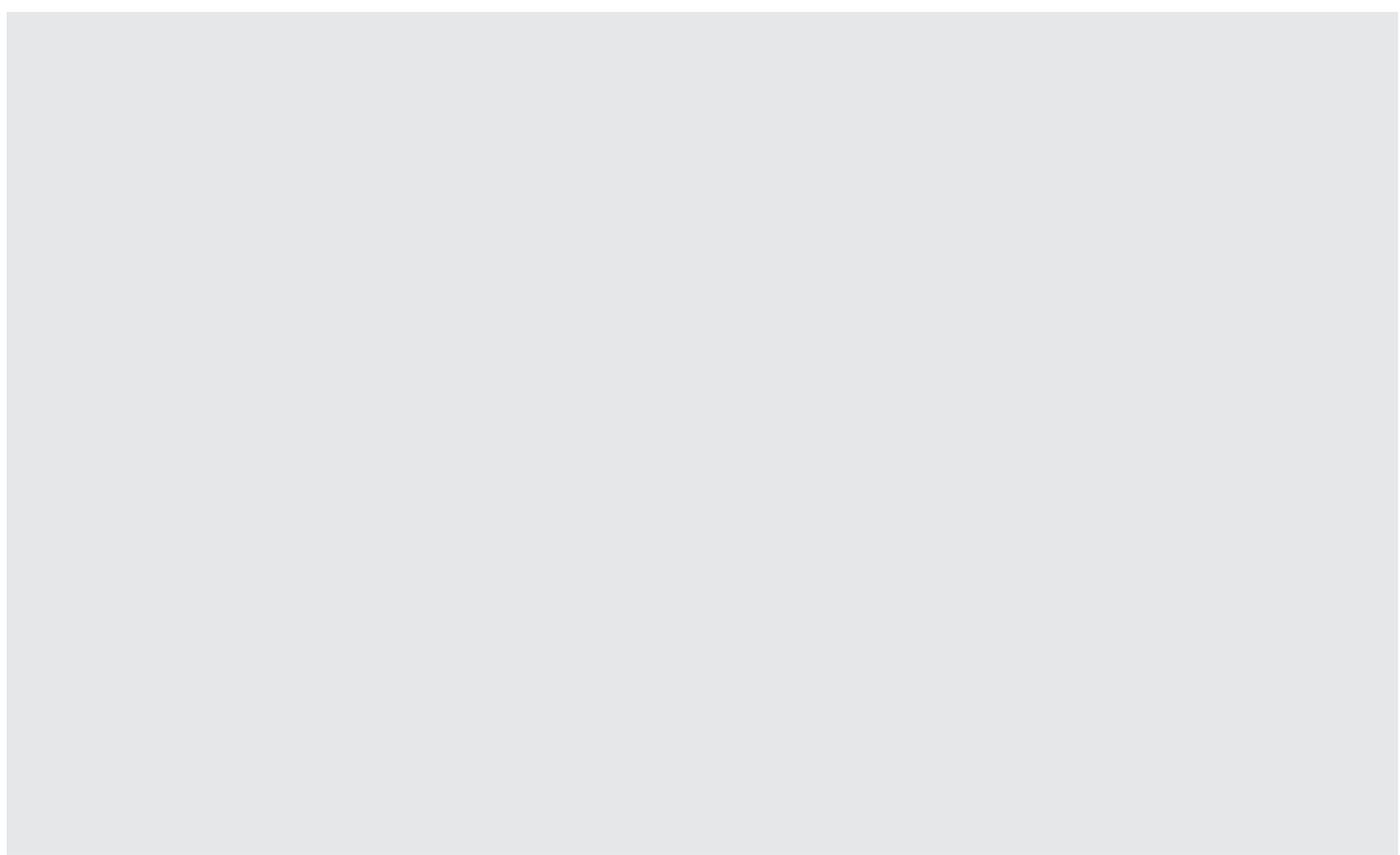
“It’s satisfying work,” said Snyder. “We know how to work with government. We can speak to someone at the corporate level of major companies. We’re able to effect change. Our goal is to bring a difficult problem to resolution and to educate consumers how to advocate for themselves.”

During January through October 2023 (the latest available figures), Boston’s team handled 882 cases, retrieved \$1,104,167 for consumers and, with permission from the callers, referred 460 of those cases to WBZ’s I-Team producer. The producer decides which cases to bring to the station’s investigative reporters. Those that go on-air generally epitomize a widespread problem or a new scam that’s targeting the community. Some are especially heartbreaking—or heartwarming.

“I’ve volunteered with many organizations over the years and I’m especially proud to work at CFA,” said Helen O’Connor of Wellesley, who joined 25 years ago. “It’s the most fulfilling of all the things I’ve done. We’re serving people, learning new things constantly, working with good people. You’re supposed to be at CFA on your day every week, working with the same team. We take it seriously.” Volunteers follow up with callers for as many weeks or months as it takes to resolve their case.

People used to call to complain about a merchant who wouldn’t take back an item but now their problems are more complicated, said O’Connor. “They’re so grateful to reach somebody who will listen and cares about them.”

Call For Action, the nation’s first telephone helpline, was founded in 1963 by Ellen Sulzberger Straus at New York City radio station WMCA. Initially her goal was to handle housing complaints. Her efforts resulted in revisions to that city’s Code Enforcement procedures and four federal indictments against slumlords. Part of the Sulzberger family, majority owners of *The New York Times*, and co-owner of WMCA with her husband, she was convinced that by leveraging connections to news media, Call For Action could more effectively resolve consumer complaints. Today there are 19 Call For Action teams in the network, in cities across the U.S. Each is affiliated with local TV, radio stations, or newspapers. National headquarters is in Rockville, Maryland.

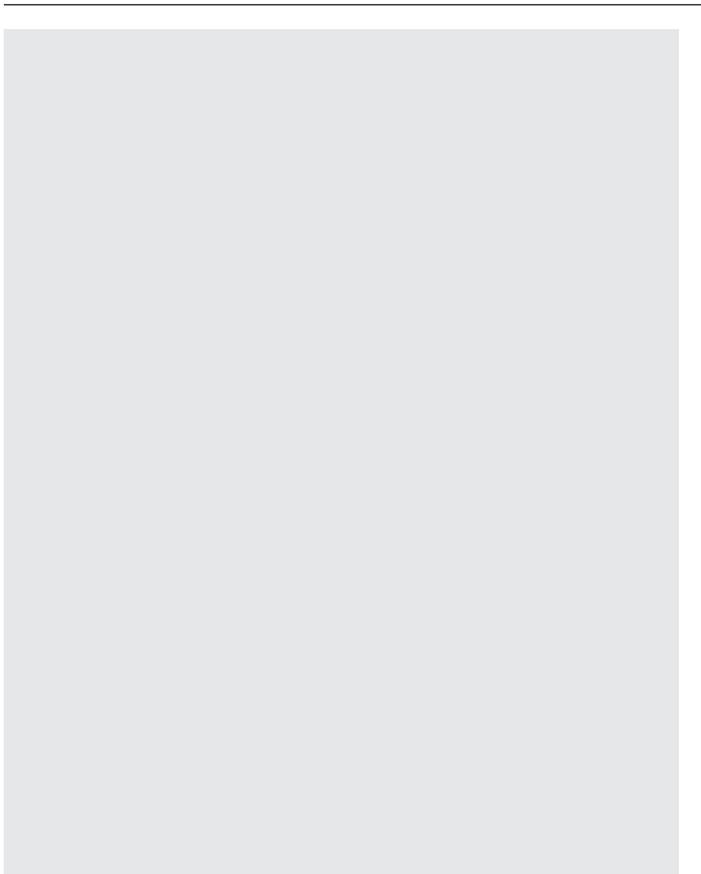




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“Rarely a day goes by that we don’t hear about some new kind of problem.”

– Rosalie Snyder, CFA co-director



Boston CFA primarily serves residents, and occasionally small businesses, in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, sometimes Maine and Rhode Island, and Vermont or Connecticut rarely.

Snyder and Koehler said the most frequent complaints involve new and used car purchases, travel-related problems, or scams that cheat people out of savings. While scammers often target older people, even young adults are now getting robbed through their digital and electronic forms of payment where there’s no paper trail.

“Rarely a day goes by that we don’t hear about some new kind of problem,” said Snyder, to which Koehler added, “I just got my first question about crypto currency.”

CFA does not offer legal assistance. Instead, they refer callers to the Massachusetts Bar Association’s Dial-A-Lawyer for free legal advice.

“Our team is composed of interesting people—thinkers and doers,” said Koehler. Among them are social workers, a retired *Boston Globe* reference librarian, a Harvard counselor, educators at area colleges, a nurse, computer technology experts, and a financial services adviser. Skills required include the ability to listen carefully, process disparate

pieces of information, consider different ways of looking at a problem, and being savvy at computer research.

Judy Zorfass of Weston joined in 2016 after a career that included directing federally funded education programs. “CFA allows me in retirement to provide direct services that have a positive impact on people. I also learn something every week. We’re very collaborative. Some problems are knotty and there’s always someone to help you figure it out.”

Typical cases, said Zorfass, involve faulty home repairs, roofing, or construction. She has helped callers who’ve had problems with E-Z Pass, the post office, phone service providers, or fraud. “Sometimes they bought something but didn’t read the fine print. Sadly, we have to explain to the caller, ‘this is a lesson so many of us have learned.’ They’ve lost money but there’s nothing they can do.”

Wellesley resident Cathy Milton is a retired special education teacher and consultant, past president of the Wellesley League of Women Voters (LWV) and active with community groups. She joined five years ago, influenced by one of Boston’s first CFA volunteers, Lydia Goodhue, also of Wellesley, known for her citizen leadership roles ranging from the Wellesley LWV to clean-up of Boston Harbor.

“We help consumers take steps they never had to think about before,” said Milton. “If a child isn’t getting special help they need in school, that taps into my expertise. If someone has a stroke and suddenly needs a handicap

equipped vehicle, we explain how to get documentation from a doctor or social worker and ways to determine their health insurance

coverage. We can send information on wheelchair accessibility at home. What I really like is helping consumers feel good about what they’ve achieved,” Milton said. **WW**

**FOR HELP WITH A CONSUMER PROBLEM**, contact Call For Action weekdays at 617.787.7070 or email: [WBZcallforaction@cbs.com](mailto:WBZcallforaction@cbs.com).  
**TO ASK ABOUT VOLUNTEERING**, call 617.787.7070 or email: [WBZcallforaction@viacomcbs.com](mailto:WBZcallforaction@viacomcbs.com) and say Attention: Director.

