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## Mold causes health concerns at local office

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After ReMax 1st Choice employees become ill, business owner hires firm to perform tests to determine cause

RINCON - When employees of ReMax 1st Choice suddenly fell ill, business owner and broker Patricia French became alarmed and summoned an expert to find the cause.

Win Home Inspection performed tests at the ReMax offices at 135 Goshen Road Ext., and detected high levels of the black mold, Stachybotrys.

Carole Hogge [3], a 61-year-old ReMax agent, entered the hospital about two weeks ago suffering from symptoms linked to the mold, French said. French said this and other illnesses prompted her to get the laboratory test.

C.J. BoBo-Ellison, an employee who handles rental property, has been feeling sick since about March and April, experiencing puffy eyes and nose bleeds.

"I knew something was wrong," Ellison said. "I just didn't know what it was."

Ellison was not the only one.

Angela Bright [4], an employee since ReMax 1st Choice opened two years ago, said she suffers from nose bleeds and allergy symptoms after working in the conference center.

French told Ed Beaty [5], the building's owner, about the results of the inspection, which contained reports of fungus in the air and in the carpet. According to the report made up by Win Home Inspection, the mold was caused by "moisture infiltration around the windows."

French also informed Beaty [6] on corrective procedures suggested by inspectors.

"Windows have been leaking for two-and-a-half years," said French. "When I told Beaty [7], he said he would handle it, not to worry about it."

When questioned later about the mold, Beaty [8] offered a written statement in which he said he took all necessary steps to determine what the problem was and then immediately followed recommendations of environmental experts.

Beaty [9]'s statement also said, "Although there remains testing to be done, our consultant has informed us that he has not determined that dangerous levels of any kind of substances or mold exists or ever existed."

On Oct. 3, ReMax 1st employees arrived at work to find the walls in the conference center had been stripped and a strong odor similar to bleach filled the hallway.

French said her office's main hallway that is shared by Effingham [10] Rehab Spine & Sport now has the smell of strong chemicals.

"My main concern is for the people who work here, the people who come here and the customers ...," said French. "I'm just sorry that he's not more concerned about the people in this building."

Arthur V. Martin [11], president of the independent consulting firm Arthur V. Martin Associates Inc. [12], is an expert in health and safety issues and air quality control. Having worked all over the U.S. [13] and 12 other countries, he was called on to test the Rincon office.

He said test results won't be available until next week, but did say bleach should not be used to treat mold.

"Bleach is not an effective means for killing mold. In fact it adds more moisture and it can exacerbate the molds," Martin [14] said. "I think the EPA [15] no longer recognizes bleach as a contamination clean-up product."

Meanwhile, French remains concerned about the health of office employees.

"I want a safe environment for the agents and the office staff to work in. That's my main goal,"

French said.

On Thursday, the ReMax office was still officially closed, but agents moved their switchboard upstairs to a safer room, according to French. For customers and clients convenience, agents can be contacted at (912) 826-1000 and will arrange a meeting at a more convenient location.

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