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Highlights: Heating & Air Conditioning

The new issue of **Boston Consumers' CHECKBOOK** magazine, available at www.checkbook.org, compares 60 local heating and air-conditioning services. Findings from CHECKBOOK's report include:

- CHECKBOOK's ratings reveal big differences in the quality of work offered by area companies. Ten of the 60 heating and a/c services evaluated were rated "superior" for "overall performance" by 90 percent or more of their surveyed customers, while nine companies scored much lower, receiving such favorable ratings from 60 percent or fewer of their surveyed customers.
- Prices varied widely. Some examples of price quotes CHECKBOOK gathered for routine jobs:
 - For the installation of an Aprilaire Whole House Humidifier, prices quoted by area companies ranged from \$399 to \$1,075.
 - To replace the fuel pump for an oil furnace, prices ranged from \$191 to \$500.
 - To install a Honeywell VisionPro Touchscreen programmable thermostat for furnace and air conditioner, prices ranged from \$200 to \$656.
 - To install a new igniter in a gas furnace, prices ranged from \$184 to \$344.
 - For basic-maintenance contracts, not including costs of any parts or costs of labor for needed repairs, prices ranged from \$100 to \$300 for one year of coverage.
- Although most consumers surprisingly don't get competitive bids even for costly jobs, getting more than one bid will often save homeowners hundreds or thousands of dollars.
- The most important maintenance task for either a furnace or a cooling system is something you can do yourself—regularly replacing the air filter. If you do that faithfully, getting a maintenance visit from a technician may not be necessary every year. Yearly visits are more likely to be justified if the system is old, heavily used, in a dusty area, oil-fueled, or in a very large house.
- Be skeptical about entering a maintenance contract. If you might want one, be sure to check exactly what is covered and shop for price.
- Before installation of a new system or major system expansion, get proposals from several firms and use each firm to help you define your needs. How well you design the system will affect how quickly and uniformly the house is heated or cooled, how much noise and vibration you experience, how troubled you will be by drafts, how easy the system will be to maintain, and other important aspects of performance.
- If you are considering buying new equipment, be skeptical about claims of cost savings from more energy-efficient equipment. There may be substantial savings, and there are

compelling public-interest reasons to install efficient equipment. But some firms are prone to exaggerating the size of the savings—in order to sell new equipment, or more expensive equipment.

- Get several companies to make proposals, ask for documentation of how much you will save on your energy bills compared to what you now have, and ask questions.
- CHECKBOOK suggests software consumers can use to do their own energy-cost comparisons and also provides examples of the effects of energy savings for different options in an illustrative home. For many area homes, the best option may be a heat pump.
- When choosing a system, keep in mind that bigger is definitely not always better. An oversized unit will cost more and will cycle on and off constantly, thus boosting your utility bill, making more noise, requiring more frequent maintenance, and dying sooner.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated heating and air-conditioning services, as shown in the new issue of Boston Consumers' CHECKBOOK, and CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.

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