



San Dimas Sheriff's Station

Neighborhood Watch News

Charitable Giving Information

DO YOU REALLY KNOW WHERE YOUR DONATIONS ARE GOING?

You're inspired to help out, but where should you send your donations? During many crises, scam charities quickly pop up to prey on people's big hearts and open pockets.

Warnings about bogus charities have added to the importance of finding which nonprofit organizations deserve your support.

Here are five ways to check out a charity and make sure your donations aren't frittered away or stolen by scammers:

Visit the watchdogs. Three groups put large, general-interest charities under the microscope: the American Institute of Philanthropy (AIP) (www.charitywatch.org), the Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance (www.give.org), and Charity Navigator (www.charitynavigator.org). Those watchdogs, nonprofits themselves, use different standards for their reviews, so it's a good idea to check them all. Wise Giving Alliance and Charity Navigator provide free online evaluations. Also, the Wise Giving Alliance will send you its quarterly giving guide for a donation of \$45 or more. AIP offers a free list of its top-rated charities in 36 categories. Donations of \$40 or more will get you three issues of its charity-rating guide, though you can ask for a free sample.

Crunch the numbers. Consider doing some of your own research. At www.guidestar.org, you can download the "990" tax form of virtually any nonprofit. The annual report provides financial information and outlines the charity's accomplishments.

The Nonprofit Coordinating Committee of New York (http://npccny.org/Form_990/990.htm)

provides an excellent primer on how to interpret the form.

Don't be fooled. Sometimes scammers and charities with less-than-stellar reputations use lookalike names that can trick you into giving to the wrong organization. You'll come across such groups on the Internet. When we typed "children's wish" into an internet search engine, for example, the top results included links for Children's Wish Foundation International, a group that received zero stars from Charity Navigator, and not the more respected Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Hang up on telemarketers. They often work for independent fund-raising companies that keep a large percentage of the donations they raise on a nonprofit's behalf. A study by Connecticut charity regulators found that telemarketers pocketed nearly two-thirds of every dollar they raised for the state's police, firefighter, and civic groups in 2003. And that was the best showing in the 17 years the state has reported solicitation results.

Also, giving through a telemarketer denies you the opportunity to check out the charity. Worse, the caller could be a swindler out to get your credit-card number. Some organizations, such as colleges and public TV stations, do employ their own telemarketers. But if you want to be sure your entire donation is going to the right place, hang up the phone and contact the charity directly.

Always remember to report any suspicious calls or requests to law enforcement immediately.

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