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Office of the Attorney General Consumer Alert — Charitable Donations

You receive a telephone call from a group claiming to be raising money for the families of local police officers killed in the line of duty. The caller says that the organization must raise \$5,000 in the next three days to be able to fully fund scholarships for children of deceased officers and asks whether they can send someone to your home to pick up a donation towards this great cause.

Making charitable donations to help others can be very rewarding. Federal and local laws provide tax benefits for making such donations. However, scammers know that and often try to take advantage of those incentives and the generosity of consumers. Here are some tips to follow to be sure that your charitable dollars are being used for your intended purpose.

Check out the charity before you give

- ◆ There are a number of independent online sources you can use to verify that a charity is legitimate:
 - IRS Select Check – <https://apps.irs.gov/app/eos/>
 - BBB Wise Giving Alliance – <http://www.give.org/>
 - Charity Navigator – <http://www.charitynavigator.org/>
 - GuideStar – <https://learn.guidestar.org/products/verification-solutions/guidestar-charity-check>
 - National Center for Charitable Statistics – <http://www.nccs.urban.org/>

- ◆ Companies or individuals soliciting charitable donations in the District of Columbia are also required to obtain a license from the District of Columbia government. Ask the charity for its license number. You can also contact the District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, Corporations Division, at (202) 442-4432, to verify the charity is licensed in the District of Columbia.

- ◆ Ask the charity for written information on the organization’s mission, how your donation will be used, and for verification that your contribution is tax deductible. Find out what percentage of your donation goes to the charity’s mission. A legitimate charity should readily provide this type of information.

Warning signs—charities to avoid

The following are warning signs that should tell you to avoid making a contribution to a suspicious charity:

- ◆ The charity refuses to send you written material describing itself or other information concerning



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how it intends to use your donation.

- ◆ The charity asks for your payment via a money order or cash.
- ◆ The organization requires your donation immediately, and offers to send a courier to collect your contribution.
- ◆ You receive an invoice or bill for a pledge you never made.
- ◆ The organization's name and logo closely resemble another charity. Scam artists often try to take advantage of names that sound or look like those of respected, legitimate charities.

How to make responsible charitable donations

- ◆ Make your donation to people or organizations you know and trust or to whom you have successfully made donations in the past.
- ◆ Never agree to give money over the phone or to a door-to-door solicitor. Ask the caller or solicitor for written information about the charity and read it before making your decision. You can also contact the charity directly to verify the person soliciting the donation is acting on behalf of the organization.
- ◆ Never make donations in cash. Instead make donations by check or credit card and ask for confirmation of your donation from the charity. This will help protect your security and provide records for tax purposes.
- ◆ Verify the legitimacy of fundraising appeals for police, firefighters and veterans. Solicitations on behalf of these types of causes often draw favorable responses from donors. Because of this, scam artists often use the word "police" or "firefighter," even when the donations will not be used to support such causes.
- ◆ When donating in response to natural disasters or national tragedies, give through well-established charities. Scammers often form charities in the wake of such events. Be especially vigilant before giving donations through peer-to-peer or social networking websites, as it is difficult to verify that your donation will be properly used.
- ◆ Some charities sell merchandise and claim that "100% of the proceeds" will go to charitable uses. Be aware that does not necessarily mean 100% of the sales price you pay will be used for charity. Make sure you ask how much of each purchase will be put to charitable uses before you donate.

If you believe you have been the victim of a scammer or to report suspicious charitable solicitations or the misuse of charitable funds, contact the Office of the Attorney General:

- ◆ Via telephone at 202-442-9828
- ◆ Via email at consumer.protection@dc.gov
- ◆ Via the Internet at <http://bit.ly/DCCConsumerComplaint>



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