

# CONSUMER'S EDGE

CONSUMER PROTECTION DIVISION, MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

BRIAN E. FROSH, MARYLAND ATTORNEY GENERAL

## KEEPING YOUR EYES OPEN WHEN DONATING TO CHARITIES

Whether it's after natural disasters, during the holiday season, or year-round, many generous Marylanders make tax-deductible donations to charities to help those in need. However, there are unsavory individuals who take advantage of those with big hearts and pose as charities to pocket the money for themselves. Consumers should always be on the lookout to ensure that their dollars are going to the intended cause.

### Remember to always follow these three rules:

1. Check with the Maryland Secretary of State's Office at 410-974-5521 or at <http://sos.maryland.gov/charity/pages/searchcharity.aspx> to be sure the charity is registered.
2. 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.
3. Find out what percentage of your donation goes to the charity's mission. Charities must file reports with the Secretary of State disclosing this information.

### Don't Be Rushed

These days, many charities solicit money by telephone. Telephone solicitations can be legitimate requests for money, but it is possible the caller does not represent a genuine charity. Unscrupulous callers want to get your money fast. They often ask for a credit card number or offer to send a courier to pick up your check before you can change your mind. Similar precautions should be exercised in response to door-to-door solicitations. When solicited by phone or door-to-door, always ask the caller or solicitor to provide you with written material about the charity. Even if the charity has an urgent need for money, the need will still exist after you read what they've sent.

### Before you give, make sure you know:

- The full name, address and phone number of the charity.
- If the charity (and paid fundraiser, if one is used) is registered with the Maryland Secretary of State.
- How much of your donation goes to the charity and how much goes to the fundraiser who contacted you.
- For what purpose your contribution will be used.
- If your contribution is tax deductible.



### How is Your Money Used?

Some charities use paid fundraisers to contact you for a donation. These fundraisers may keep a portion of your gift as their fee. Find out how much



of your gift goes to the charity. You might be better off sending your check directly to the charity and bypassing the fundraisers. The Charitable Organizations Division of Maryland's Secretary of State's Office has a master list of thousands of registered charities. The Office can provide information about:

- The purpose of a charity.
- The amount of money a charity raises.
- The percentage of the money collected that is used for charitable program services.
- The percentage that is used for administrative costs and fundraising.



### Warning Signs

Some solicitations should raise immediate red flags. Be wary if:

- The organization refuses to send you written material or financial information.
- The solicitor 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 with a similar purpose.

Bogus charities frequently use names that resemble those of well-known, legitimate organizations. Fake charities frequently surface after national emergencies or natural disasters. The only way to be sure a charity is legitimate is to do some research before you give.

Donors have the right to ask as many questions as necessary to make an informed decision about whether or not to donate. If the charity you are considering resists answering your questions, don't give.

### CALL FIRST

If you have any questions concerning a charity, call the Charitable Organizations Division of the Maryland Secretary of State's office at 410-974-5521 or visit <http://sos.maryland.gov/charity/pages/searchcharity.aspx>

Remember to call before you write the check!

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## HOW TO CONTACT US

### Consumer Protection Division

200 St. Paul Place, 16th Fl., Baltimore, MD 21202

- **General Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-8662  
Toll-free: 1-888-743-0023 TDD: 410-576-6372  
9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday  
[www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/](http://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/)
- **Health Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-1840  
Toll-free: 1-877-261-8807 TDD: 410-576-6372  
9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday  
[www.marylandcares.org](http://www.marylandcares.org)
- **For information on branch offices** in Largo, Salisbury, Hagerstown, and a full list of offices across Maryland, visit: [www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/contactus.aspx](http://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/contactus.aspx)

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