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Scam Alert – Charity Fraud

by Stacie Harris, Economic Crimes Unit

So you want to make a charitable donation. How do you tell the difference between a legitimate charitable organization and that everyday thief?

Charity scams have been around for a long time and take center stage right after a disaster has struck, such as fires, tornados, tsunamis, hurricanes and, the most memorable tragedy/disaster of our time, 9/11. These are the times that thieves like to play on people's emotions.

After Hurricane Katrina struck, the Federal Bureau of Investigations estimated that there were over 2300 charitable websites that popped up. Most of the sites were fake and originated outside of the United States.

Many fake charities will often name their organization something closely related to a well-known legitimate organization. These everyday thieves have also been known to use a legitimate organization's logos for their own personal gain.

Before giving out any of your personal or financial information, verify the charity with the Better Business Bureau, and your local Secretary of State. You can also check out a charity's rating at Charity Navigator.

- Better Business Bureau website is www.bbb.org . You can search their charity database by selecting the "Charity & Donors section". For those without web access, you may also call them at (866)206-1800.
- Colorado Secretary of State website is www.sos.state.co.us . You will find their charities database under their "Licensing Center". For those without web access, you may also call them at (303)894-2200, Ext. 6409.
- Charity Navigator website is www.charitynavigator.org. For those without web access, you may also call them at (201)818-1288

For charities that are legitimate, please note that not all of your donation may go for the cause that you believe you are contributing your money to. A percentage of the donations are sometimes placed towards administrative costs to cover advertising, salaries and fundraising. Ask questions to find out what percentage of your donation goes to support the cause, or to those administrative costs; whether the solicitor is a paid fundraiser or a volunteer; where the organization is located and their mailing address. A solicitor of a legitimate charitable organization will have these answers readily available and will be willing to provide them to you without hesitation.

If you are a victim of a charity scam, first contact your local law enforcement agency (police or sheriff) to inform them. File a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) at www.ftc.gov or by calling (877)382-4357.

If you are a victim of an online scam, file a complaint with the Internet Crime Complaint Center at www.ic3.gov.

~ IDENTIFY A SCAM BEFORE A SCAM IDENTIFIES YOU! ~