

Top Tips for Avoiding “Charity” Scammers

Provided by SeriousGivers



Avoiding “charity” scammers is an important part of serious giving. Every dollar scam “charities” take in is a dollar that could instead have gone to a strong charity doing valuable work with the funds entrusted to it.

Our Top Tips:

1. Identify the organization. Obtain identifying information about the organization:

- a. The charity’s Federal Employer Identification Number (EIN): typically a nine-digit number, normally shown like 12-3456789. EINs are the key to finding information about a charity. **While charity names may be similar, no two charities have the same EIN.**
- b. The organization’s precise name. Scam “charities” often adopt names confusingly similar to legitimate charities.
- c. The main location (city and state) from which the organization operates.

2. If it’s in the SGO database, you know it has passed the tests to be treated as a charity. More than 300,000 public charities have qualified. Go to seriousgivers.org/find-a-charity/. Being in the SGO database confirms that the organization is a public charity. Review the information in its SGO Report, including its key performance indicators.

A screenshot of the SeriousGivers.org website. The page features a blue header with the site name and navigation links. The main content area is titled "Find a Charity" and includes a search engine form. The form has several input fields: "Organization name (full or partial)", "Employer identification number (EIN) (omit hyphen)", "State", "City", "ZIP (five digits)", "Charity Code", and "Keyword". There are also radio buttons for search criteria: "Begins with", "Exact match", and "Included anywhere in the name". A "Search" button is at the bottom of the form. The page also has sidebars with "Latest at SGO" and "Site Links" sections.

3. If the organization isn’t in the SGO database, check IRS Publication 78 (online). You can’t get a charitable contribution deduction for a donation to an organization unless it

- a. Is a church, or
- b. Is a government organization, or

- c. Has received a ruling from the IRS. Organizations that have such a ruling are listed online in [IRS Publication 78](#).

The screenshot shows the IRS website's search interface for charities. The page title is "Search for Charities, Online Version of Publication 78". Below the title, there is a brief description of Publication 78. The search form includes three main sections: "Organization" with a "Name" field and a dropdown menu set to "Includes"; "Location" with "City", "State" (dropdown set to "All..."), and "Country" (dropdown set to "USA") fields; and "Deductibility Code" with a dropdown menu set to "All...". There are "Search" and "Clear" buttons at the bottom of the form. The page also includes a "Search Tips" section at the bottom.

For best results with Publication 78, enter the organization's name and its main location (see #1 above).

If the organization isn't a church or government agency, and isn't listed in Publication 78, do not donate!

4. **Google the EIN:** Enter organization's EIN in the Google™ search box. See what comes up. *If the Google search produces negative information about the information, nothing related to the organization, or information about a different charity, don't donate!*
5. **Check out the key information from its IRS Form 990 or 990-EZ.**
 - a. A wealth of information is available from an organization's most recent IRS tax return (Form 990, for example). In addition to telling you a lot about how the organization spends the moneys entrusted to them, it will tell you about programs, people involved, cash reserves and debts.
 - b. Find the organization's Form 990 or 990-EZ by following the steps at seriousgivers.org/find-charity-990/
 - c. Or, ask the organization to provide its 990 directly to you. Don't donate to an organization that refuses to provide its 990 — it either doesn't want your support or has something to hide. And in either case, it is likely breaking the law.
6. **Check whether the organization has met the registration requirements in your state.**
 - a. For example, if the organization solicits donations in **California**, it should have registered and be current on its filings with the [California Registry of Charitable Trusts](#) operated by the Office of the Attorney General. *Note:* most churches and government agencies are not required to file with the Registry.

Office of the Attorney General

of California • Department of Justice • Edmund G. Brown Jr., Attorney General

Home About News Careers Contact Programs A - Z

Search the Files of the Registry of Charitable Trusts

- Welcome to the search page of the Registry of Charitable Trusts (RCT). Here you are able to search for information on charities, charity fundraising professionals, and raffle registrants.
- This search page provides access to information about various types of entities that are registered with the Registry of Charitable Trusts. With a few exceptions, it does not currently provide access to electronic copies of documents filed with the Registry. Electronic copies of filings by certain registrants, such as the annual financial reports filed by commercial fundraisers for charitable purposes, are available elsewhere on the Charities website. Access to these reports is available at CFR search.
- Please enter search criteria below to start your search. Enter data in any field. Remember, the fewer your search criteria, the broader the range of the results that will be obtained by your search. For example, if you search using a name or federal employer identification number (FEIN) and leave the Registration Type or the Record Type fields blank, your results may return multiple registrations for the entity. It may be, for example, that the entity is registered both as a charity and as an organization conducting raffles.
- If you have partial information, you may use a wildcard search by placing an asterisk at the beginning or end of the search terms entered. For example, if you are not sure whether a name is spelled Alan or Allen, enter Al* to search.

Record Type: All

Registration Type: All

Secretary of State or Franchise Tax Board Number:

Organization Name:

RCT Registration Number:

DBA:

FEIN:

Registration Status: All

County:

City:

State: --All--

Use the organization's EIN (#1 above); if you don't have that, be sure you have its name right.

- b. For **other states**, see the state-by-state listings at the **National Association of State Charity Officials** website: <http://www.nasconet.org/agencies>

If the organization purports to be a charity and isn't current on its required filings with your state, don't donate.

7. **Assume that a charity using paid telemarketers is unworthy of your support**, unless and until the charity provides solid evidence (through its Form 990 and otherwise) that it is

worthy, that its use of paid telemarketers is cost-effective and suitable in its overall operations, and that it appropriately uses the moneys entrusted to it.

- a. The connection between sleazy “charities” and paid telemarketing can’t be denied — they frequently travel together. Just take a look at the results from [Operation False Charity](#) headed by the Federal Trade Commission, including the [lawsuits filed by the CA Attorney General’s Office](#).

From the Federal Trade Commission

The FTC provides solid resources on how to avoid “charity” scammers.



The FTC suggests that donors **avoid any charity or fundraiser that:**

- ★ refuses to provide written information about its identity, its mission, its costs, and how the donation will be used;
- ★ will not provide proof that a contribution is tax deductible;
- ★ uses a name that closely resembles that of a better-known, reputable organization;
- ★ thanks a potential donor for a pledge the person doesn’t remember making;
- ★ asks a potential contributor for bank account or credit card information before the person has reviewed the organization’s information and agreed to contribute;
- ★ uses high-pressure tactics to secure a donation before the potential donor has had a chance to make an informed decision about giving;
- ★ asks for donations in cash;
- ★ offers to send a courier or overnight delivery service to collect the donation immediately;
or
- ★ guarantees sweepstakes winnings in exchange for a contribution.

See also the following FTC pages:

- ★ The main [Avoid Charity Fraud](#) page provides tips includes links to FTC and other resources.
- ★ The FTC’s [Charity Checklist](#).
- ★ [Warnings on solicitations for veterans and military families](#).