

Make a Meaningful Gift This Holiday Season

It's important to avoid scams of all kinds at this time of year, and unfortunately some of them come disguised as "charities." You'll find tips about how to spot the bad apples at the end of this piece.

But first, the good news! Here are some great ways to give that reflect your values and are meaningful to you and others:

✔ **Say "thank you" to a nonprofit that's helped you in the past.** Maybe you worked at a nonprofit when you were young where you gained skills and confidence (and a good feature on your resume). Or maybe the high school debate team or the Boys & Girls Club was an important haven for you. Consider giving one day's pay (your annual salary divided by 228 days) to that nonprofit. Pay it forward for someone else.

✔ **Consider the nonprofits you already know and appreciate.** For example, where do you volunteer or serve on the board? You can give your gift "in honor of" a staff member or fellow volunteer whose work you appreciate. Think about which nonprofits help you, your family members, and your neighbors. Perhaps your niece gets help from a disabilities nonprofit, your parent belongs to a senior center, or you enjoy a wilderness area, a museum, public radio, or an online encyclopedia.

✔ **Use social media to ask your personal network for recommendations.** For example, ask on your Facebook page for recommendations from veterans about which veterans assistance organizations they respect.

✔ **If you are thinking about giving to others less fortunate than you -- as many of us do during the holiday season -- remember to give to the nonprofits that help others and to those that speak out for them.** For example, if you give to a food pantry, make another donation to the local hunger coalition. Direct services and advocacy are both vital to making a difference in the lives of people in need.

✔ **Give locally... but also give to communities that lack the resources that yours might have.** In California, nonprofits in rural areas have less funding than those in big cities. Nonprofits in communities of color have less funding than those in predominantly white communities, and nonprofits in poor neighborhoods have less money than those in wealthy neighborhoods. So for example, if you live in a city, make a donation to a low-income suburb or to a rural area. If you make a donation to your alma mater, make a matching donation to university that may have fewer donors. If you aren't sure where to give, make the gift to the local community foundation or United Way.

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Now for our help with the bad news: scams posing as nonprofits

Before giving to an organization you don't know — even a famous one — do a little online research. Type the organization's name into Google along with a word such as "problem" or "wrong" to see if there are accusations against the charity, or criticisms of its work. For example, an international nonprofit might have good finances, but a web search reveals that the people in the overseas nation believe the nonprofit is harming local small businesses. (Of course you will have to decide whether any accusations are legitimate and whether or not you agree with any criticisms). You can review the charity's finance reports — typically available free at www.guidestar.org (not all charities have to provide these reports, called Federal Form 990). Members of the public — such as volunteers and beneficiaries — can also write reviews of charities on Yelp and GreatNonprofits.org.

Don't click on links in email from nonprofits when you want to give -- especially well-known nonprofits. Instead, type their name directly into your browser. Scammers send emails with links that go to "look-alike" pages that appear to be legitimate but actually feed the pockets of the scammers.

Don't give your credit card number over the phone or online to a nonprofit you don't know directly.

If you think you've been scammed, give a holiday gift to thousands of other well-meaning people by reporting the scammer to the California Attorney General.

Remember: California's nonprofits are "hidden in plain sight" ... we're not only the homeless shelter or food bank. We're your church, the Campfire Girls, Downton Abbey, the local chorus. We are all breathing cleaner air and our children's toys are safer thanks to California's nonprofit environmental and consumer advocates. Those of us who are people of color, women, people with disabilities and LGBT benefit every day from what civil rights nonprofits have done for us.

As nonprofits, we rest in the arms of our communities and supporters. Thank you for being there with us.