

The logo consists of two adjacent rectangular boxes. The left box is white with a blue border and contains the word "SCAM" in blue, bold, uppercase letters. The right box is solid blue with the words "NOT ME" in white, bold, uppercase letters.

Charity Verification Guide

How to Verify a Charity Before Donating

Before giving to any charitable organization, take time to verify its legitimacy. This guide provides practical steps to ensure your donations reach genuine causes and make the impact you intend.

Step 1: Check Basic Registration and Status

Verify Tax-Exempt Status

- **Search the IRS Tax Exempt Organization Search tool:** irs.gov/charities-non-profits/tax-exempt-organization-search
- Confirm the organization has 501(c)(3) public charity status
- Verify the organization's Employer Identification Number (EIN)
- Note: Some religious organizations and very small charities may not be listed but can still be legitimate

Check State Registration

- Most states require charities to register before soliciting donations
- Search your state's charity registration database (usually through the Attorney General's office or Secretary of State)
- Verify the charity is in good standing with current registration

Step 2: Research the Charity's Reputation and Effectiveness

Use Charity Evaluation Websites

- **Charity Navigator:** charitynavigator.org - Rates charities on financial health, accountability, and transparency
- **GuideStar (now Candid):** guidestar.org - Provides access to nonprofit financial reports and Form 990s
- **CharityWatch:** charitywatch.org - Analyzes efficiency, governance, and financial practices
- **BBB Wise Giving Alliance:** give.org - Evaluates charities against 20 accountability standards

Review the Charity's Financial Documents

- Examine the charity's Form 990 (tax filing for nonprofits)
- Look for:
 - Program expenses vs. administrative costs (ideally 65%+ spent on programs)

- Executive compensation (should be reasonable for the charity's size)
- Revenue sources and financial sustainability
- Any unusual expenses or financial practices

Evaluate the Charity's Impact

- Look for clear descriptions of programs and services
- Check for measurable outcomes, not just activities
- Find evidence of effectiveness (peer-reviewed studies, testimonials from beneficiaries)
- Compare similar charities' cost-per-outcome ratios if available

Step 3: Examine the Organization's Online Presence

Analyze the Website

- **Professional appearance:** While not all legitimate charities have sophisticated websites, extremely unprofessional sites may be a red flag
- **Transparency:** Look for:
 - Clear mission and program descriptions
 - Staff and board member information
 - Published annual reports and financial statements
 - Privacy policy
- **Contact information:** Verify physical address (not just a P.O. box), phone number, and email

Review Social Media Presence

- Check for active, consistent posting
- Look for evidence of actual work and impact
- Read comments from donors and beneficiaries
- Verify consistent messaging across platforms

Step 4: Direct Contact Verification

Call the Charity

- Use the phone number from the official website or GuideStar
- Ask specific questions about their work, history, and how donations are used
- Note how transparent and knowledgeable staff members are

Email Inquiries

- Request specific information about programs
- Ask how your donation would be used
- Evaluate the quality and timeliness of responses

Visit If Possible

- For local charities, consider visiting their office or attending an event

- Observe their operations and speak with staff members

Step 5: Watch for Common Red Flags

Solicitation Practices

- High-pressure tactics or emotional manipulation
- Unsolicited donation requests via email, phone, or mail
- Requests for cash, wire transfers, or gift cards
- Claims of guaranteed tax deductions for all donations

Financial and Organizational Red Flags

- Vague mission statements or unclear descriptions of programs
- Unrealistic promises (e.g., "100% of donations go directly to the cause")
- Similar names to well-known charities (e.g., "National Cancer Research Society" vs. "American Cancer Society")
- Recently created organizations without a track record, especially after disasters or major news events

Step 6: Special Considerations

Disaster Relief Donations

- Established organizations with disaster relief experience are often better equipped than new charities
- Check if the charity has a presence in the affected area
- Be patient with your giving after disasters—needs continue long after media coverage fades

International Charities

- Verify international groups have proper U.S. registration if they operate or fundraise in the U.S.
- Look for evidence of in-country partnerships and cultural understanding
- Research country-specific regulatory compliance

Religious Organizations

- Even if exempt from some reporting requirements, reputable religious charities maintain transparency
- Ask for annual reports and evidence of impact
- Check denominational or religious governing body affiliations

Step 7: Document Your Donations

Keep Records for Tax Purposes

- Save donation receipts, canceled checks, credit card statements
- Request written acknowledgment for donations of \$250 or more

- Document any goods/services received in exchange for donations

Maintain Ongoing Engagement

- Sign up for the charity's newsletter
- Follow the organization on social media
- Request reports on the impact of programs you've funded

Resources for Charity Verification

Government Resources

- **IRS Tax Exempt Organization Search:** irs.gov/charities-non-profits/tax-exempt-organization-search
- **FTC Charity Scams Information:** consumer.ftc.gov/articles/charity-scams
- **State Charity Regulators:** nasconet.org/resources/state-government/

Charity Evaluation Organizations

- **Charity Navigator:** charitynavigator.org
- **GuideStar (Candid):** guidestar.org
- **CharityWatch:** charitywatch.org
- **BBB Wise Giving Alliance:** give.org

Scam Reporting Outlets

- **FTC Complaint Form:** reportfraud.ftc.gov
- **FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center:** ic3.gov
- **Better Business Bureau Scam Tracker:** bbb.org/scamtracker
- **National Center for Disaster Fraud Hotline:** 1-866-720-5721

Conclusion

Taking time to verify charities ensures your donations make the impact you intend and protects you from fraud. By following these steps, you can give confidently to organizations that truly advance the causes you care about. Remember that legitimate charities welcome scrutiny and value transparent relationships with their donors.

