

END OF THE YEAR AND CHARITY GIVING

You're reading this after Christmas. Unwrapped presents may be setting under the tree, the wrapping now in the trash. Some of the special Christmas baked treats and food remain, continuing to tempt us. The memories of reunions with not-often-seen relatives and the good cheer surrounding them are still fresh. The end of the year approaches. With Christmas in the past, what's left to do in 2014?

For many people, one of the last tasks for the year is to make their charitable contributions. To deduct contributions for the 2014 tax year, you need to make the contribution by December 31. Everyone who makes donations to charity wants their dollars to have an impact, to benefit those who need the help, or to help the cause to which you donated.

I encourage everyone making end-of-year donations to do your homework before giving. Just because an organization calls itself a charity, and even gets a non-profit designation from the Internal Revenue Service, does not make it a good investment. Charity Navigator, an affiliate of the Better Business Bureau which evaluates charities, reports about one million charities in the US. They are not all well-managed, or effective at their mission.

Here are a few tips which can separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to charities:

- Give to a cause which motivates you. Whether your interest is in ending world hunger, helping veterans, finding a cure for cancer, or preserving wildlife, an organization exists to promote that cause. Find out which of those organizations does the best job, and support them.
- Check to ensure your favorite charity is financially healthy. Of course, they all need money, but how do they manage what they get? Does it seem they can be around long enough to make a difference?
- Charities must be transparent in their accounting. If a charity is reluctant to provide public records, it raises lots of questions about what they want to hide.
- Find out about their results. Your charity might be dedicated to the loftiest of goals, but what is their history of results? If they raise a lot of money, but never achieve anything, is this a good investment? Are they raising money to keep raising money? Many people give to the

same charity every year. How about taking some time to look for a progress report on that charity?

A great deal of the information to answer these questions is available on sites like Charity Navigator. If you don't have access to a computer or don't know what to look for, contact me. I'm happy to do some research for you.

HOW DID THOSE CROOKS GET MY INFORMATION?

I've written quite a few times about the debt collector scam. This happens when someone gets a call demanding an immediate (as in today, right now) payment for an old debt, which you don't remember. You don't remember it because it does not exist. These callers threaten to send the police to arrest you, threaten lawsuits, and other scary-sounding legal action. And this is all a scam.

What really rattles the folks getting these calls is the caller knows everything about them – name, address, phone, birthdate, social security number, even bank account numbers. Some people figure if they know all that, it might be legitimate. Well, a press release from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) December 23, 2014, sheds a lot of light on how these crooks know so much about their targets.

The FTC just filed a complaint against two companies, LeapLab and Ideal Financial Solutions. LeapLab collected hundreds of thousands of loan applications from people who applied for online payday loans between 2009 and 2013. They got this information from the websites who market these payday loans, none of whom make any loans at all. These websites sell their "leads" to lenders, and apparently anyone who will pay for them. After LeapLab collected this sensitive information, it sold 95% of them to other companies for 50 cents apiece. It sold this information to companies with no legitimate need for it, including, as I suspect to phony debt collectors.

What's the moral of this story? Don't make application for an online payday loan. You are giving away your information to practically anyone who will pay less than a dollar for it.

CURRENT SCAM TRENDS

An 88-year old Clinton woman lost well over \$100 in a work-at-home scam. She received mail which solicited for an envelope-stuffing job paying high

returns. Mason Grace, a company out of New York City, promoted itself as paying \$10 for each stuffed envelope RETURNED, and promised to reimburse postage. The woman wanted to earn money to feed hungry children in impoverished countries, so ordered and paid \$99 for the envelopes, and bought the postage to mail them. And nothing happened. No payments from Mason Grace.

I called the phone number for Mason Grace, and heard a message telling me I needed to pay \$99 for an account before they would return my call. Hard to believe. If you get such mail, toss it. There's a reason we call it junk mail.

In kind of a variation of the debt collector scam, Tom Kinney of Clinton alerted me to a call he received, from someone who said he owed money for unpaid parking tickets, and for a reckless driving charge against him. This caller could not even tell Mr. Kinney what county he lived in, so he felt pretty comfortable in hanging up.

If you get these kinds of calls demanding money, take a breath. Don't do anything until you check it out. If you owe any money to the Iowa court system, a call to the clerk of court will confirm it. Don't take some random, unknown callers word for it.

Let me know about scams, fraud, or other crookedness you run across. Most of what I learn, I learn from you. Contact me at Seniors vs. Crime, Clinton County Sheriff's Office, 563-242-9211 extension 4433, or email me at randymeier@gapa911.us.

End of column/rmeier