

Attorney general urges consumers to check out charities before giving

Florida Agriculture and Consumer Services Commissioner Charles H. Bronson is urging consumers to check on the registration status and funding history of charities before agreeing to donate any money. Many charities collect about half their annual contributions in the months of November and December during the holiday season. But Bronson says it is prudent to take time to investigate a charity and ensure the money is being spent wisely.

Florida law requires most charities soliciting in Florida to register with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services each year and provide financial information about income and expenses. Religious, educational and government-based charities are exempt. Registered charities are also required to disclose how much they raised the previous year, how much is spent on administrative costs including salaries, rent, etc., how much goes toward fundraising, and the amount that actually is spent on the charitable purpose. There are more than 14,000 charities registered with the department, up from 10,800 charities just five years ago.

"Consumers can find out if a charity is following state law by checking on its registration status," Bronson said. "But beyond that, they can also find out if the charity they are considering supporting is spending the donations in a prudent manner. If an organization spends a small percentage on services, consumers may want to think twice about donating."

Consumers can find out if a charity is registered by calling the department's helpline at 1-800-HELPFLA (1-800-435-7352), or 1-800-FLAYUDA for Spanish-speaking operators, or by visiting www.800helpfla.com. They can also check the complaint history of an organization.

Bronson also provided the following tips to consider when deciding whether to donate to an organization:

- Don't judge an organization based on an impressive-sounding name. Find out what it actually does.
- Be wary of emotional appeals and organizations that have only vague plans for spending the funds they collect.
- Never give cash. Write a check payable only to an organization, not to an individual.
- Be wary of organizations that offer to send a "runner" to pick up your donation. Reputable charities are willing to wait for your contribution.
- Ask for an organization's financial report and its federal tax identification number, the latter of which you will need to claim your contribution as a tax deduction.
- Ask the organization to send you written information about its activities.
- If an organization is not registered or properly exempt, contact the Department.