

Use Caution When Donating to Relief Efforts, Expert Says

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In response to the devastation caused by the Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti, there's been an outpouring of goodwill and a desire to help victims. But not all urgent appeals for aid being broadcast on radio and television, online and at social networking sites are legitimate, a consumer expert with the U.S. Federal Trade Commission warned in an interview for the Jan. 21 American Forces Press Service weekly news podcast.

Carol Kando-Pinedo said the best way to provide immediate help is to donate money directly to established national relief organizations that have the experience and means to deliver aid. It makes sense to deal with well-known groups, but it's important to check credentials, she added. "Be wary of charities with names that sound like familiar or nationally known organizations," she said. "Some phony charities use names that sound or look like those of respected, legitimate organizations." Other tips include declining unsolicited e-mail, phone call or text requests for money and requests for personal or financial information. Often, "scam artists use this information to commit fraud against you," the consumer expert said. She added, "Don't give or send cash. For security and tax record purposes, contribute by check or credit card. Write the official name of the charity on your check." Kando-Pinedo also had advice for people who wish to donate supplies. "Before collecting any goods, be sure to contact a legitimate charity and find out if that's what's needed, if they can accept the goods and distribute them where it's needed," she explained. "If they lack that infrastructure, your goods won't get to needy people." To get a list of charities for Haiti that meet the Better Business Bureau's standards, Kando-Pinedo recommended visiting the Web site, www.bbb.org/charity. The Wise Giving Alliance at give.org and GuideStar at guidestar.org also are good sources for screening charities, she said.

(Judith Snyderman is assigned to Defense Media Activity's emerging media directorate.)

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