

CHARITIES

When choosing a charity, it is important to decide what is most important to you. Likely, it will be something that has personally affected you, and you can see the direct benefits that the charity offers.

One factor you will want to consider is how much of your donation actually goes to the cause. Every charity, even the most efficient, has overhead costs (such as electric bills, computers, printing costs, etc.) so not every dollar donated can make it to the charity's programs. Reputable charities will be up front about this. In fact they have to disclose their overhead costs, usually given in a percentage figure, according to IRS non-profit rules. Make sure to do your research so that you end up with a charity that you know will use your money wisely and makes you comfortable. Here are several suggestions before you give:

- Start with the IRS, which provides a list of all of the organizations that have received tax-exempt status. These are the groups that have been approved by the government because they have complied with the laws surrounding the forming, organizing and running of a non-profit.
- The Give.org site provides a database of approved organizations, as well as general advice and information for donors.
- The Better Business Bureau has a portion of its site devoted to donating money. Go to its charity section to get reports on specific charities, ask about a charity, lodge a complaint against a charity and get more tips on charitable giving.
- The Chronicle of Philanthropy provides the latest news on the goings-on in the non-profit world. This site also highlights charities that have been identified by watchdog groups as especially deserving and reputable.
- Ask for written information from the charity. A legitimate charity will give you information outlining its mission, how your donation will be distributed, and proof that your contribution is tax-deductible. Interfaith Community Services is happy to provide this information.

One other point: there is no right or wrong amount to give when it comes to donating money. Any amount of money you can afford to give will be appreciated. Some charities might give you suggestions as to the level of giving. Remember that you can choose one of these levels, or you can write in your own amount. Your generosity is a personal and often heartfelt decision and can have a powerful impact on you and the charity of your choice.

(Article by Jane Nugent, Northern Trust Bank)

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