



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Aug. 29, 2017

How to Help Survivors of Hurricane Harvey While Making Smart Choices

Harrisburg, PA – As a tremendous number of people, businesses, and service organizations throughout the country begin collecting and donating goods and services to assist storm survivors in Texas, the Pennsylvania Department of State, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency and Office of Attorney General Josh Shapiro want Pennsylvanians to know how they can best help and not hinder rescue and recovery efforts while also protecting themselves.

While donations of goods such as food and clothing are well-intentioned, unsolicited materials can overwhelm organizations that are tasked with helping survivors but are unprepared to store, sort and distribute large quantities of donated goods.

“This storm’s impact will be felt for years to come along the Gulf Coast,” said PEMA Director Richard D. Flinn, Jr. “Many people feel compelled to help those impacted by the storm, but please do so in a way that will truly help storm survivors, while also protecting yourself financially from those who might try to take advantage of your generosity.”

The most useful form of assistance is donations of money. Make check and credit card donations to well-established, charitable organizations that are assisting the flood relief effort. Monetary donations allow charitable

organizations the flexibility to purchase items that are needed most, and, unlike material donations, entail no transportation costs.

All three agencies offered the following tips:

- Do not give to a charity you know nothing about. Call the charity or do some research on your own. Search the name online — with the word “complaints” or “scams.” Check with the Better Business Bureau.
- Do not donate over the phone unless you are familiar with the organization.
- For door-to-door solicitors, ask to see the person’s identification and consider avoiding them altogether. Do not feel pressured into giving and allowing someone into your house.
- Do not give credit card numbers, bank account numbers or other personal financial information over the phone. Never wire money to someone claiming to be a charity.
- Whenever possible, write a check payable to the charity so you have a record of your donation. Or make a donation directly through a legitimate organization’s secure website, rather than a third-party website.
- Don't click links in unsolicited emails or on social media. Unless you previously donated to an organization, assume that an unsolicited donation request by email is a scam. Plus, links in emails or social media can unleash malware.

“It is a terrible thing to see the devastation that is occurring in Texas and throughout the Gulf region,” Secretary of State Pedro Cortés said. “As in any time of great need, generous Pennsylvanians are looking for ways they can help. We want to ensure their donations go to reputable organizations with a proven record of good service.”

Charitable organizations that solicit contributions in Pennsylvania must register with the department’s Bureau of Corporations and Charitable Organizations if their gross annual contributions are more than \$25,000. There are some statutory [exclusions and exemptions](#) to the registration requirement, for groups such as religious institutions, hospitals, and police, firefighter or veteran organizations.

To determine if a charitable group is properly registered, the public can search the [Charities Online Database](#). The website also provides a [list of organizations](#) that have been subject to corrective actions taken by the Bureau. The public may also call 1-800-732-0999.

The [Annual Charities Report](#) online contains detailed information about charitable organizations registered in Pennsylvania and professional solicitors and fundraising counsels. For instance, the report outlines what percentage of every donated dollar goes to the charity and how much is charged by the solicitors or counsels for their services.

Attorney General Josh Shapiro noted the importance of protecting yourself while helping others.

“We care deeply about the victims from this terrible storm and want to help any way we can,” said Attorney General Shapiro. “We also want Pennsylvanians to be careful as they donate, and want to help them avoid the scam artists who always surface after natural disasters like this one. Our office is here to help you avoid being scammed.”

More helpful [tips about informed giving](#) can be found at the [Charities section](#) of the [Department of State’s website](#).

To file a complaint about any charity soliciting donations in the commonwealth, contact the Division of Investigations/Audits at 717-787-0700, by email at ra-stbeiciu@pa.gov, or by mail at 401 North St., Room 212, Harrisburg, PA, 17120,

If you believe you’ve been scammed, call the Office of Attorney General’s Bureau of Consumer Protection. 1-800-441-2555 or email at scams@attorneygeneral.gov.

MEDIA CONTACTS: Ruth A. Miller, PEMA, ruthmiller@pa.gov
Wanda Murren, State, 717-783-1621
Joe Grace, OAG, 717-574-9095

###