

Public urged to help non-profits wisely

By Eugene Scott

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Cash-strapped Valley non-profit groups are asking residents to donate more but also warn of fraudulent requests.

This year, donations have gone down since residents have less to give, leaving non-profit agencies scrambling to meet the increasing demand for things such as food, shelter and clothing.

But before making any donations, residents should check the organization asking for money, said Robert Ashcraft, director of the Arizona State University Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Non-Profit Innovation. He suggests checking organizations with groups like the Corporation Commission.

Patrick McWhorter, CEO of the Alliance of Arizona Non-Profits, said information for any organization claiming to receive tax-deductible gifts should also be available on Guidestar.org. You'll find information such as organizations' tax information and non-profit status.

"Every non-profit in the country has to file with the IRS, which includes any organization with revenues over \$25,000 — unless they are a church," McWhorter said.

Always inspect non-profits with the same detail you would apply to any other entity desiring your money, he said.

People should ask, "If it's a local organization, have they visited the organization? Have they asked to see an annual report? Do they know if it's an active board of directors? Do any of the names of the associations resonate with the individual?" Ashcraft said.

Researching the organization receiving your gifts is important, especially when it comes to reporting one's taxes.

"If you make a donation to them and report it on your taxes, it can come back to bite you if they aren't a legitimate organization," he said. "And you're going to get hit on your taxes."

If people are uncertain about a non-profit, Ashcraft said perhaps they should give their money to trusts and umbrella organizations that know more about the Valley's non-profit community.

"If a person doesn't have a lot of time but they have a field of interest, look at the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust and the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust funds," Ashcraft said. "They would have done some of the heavy lifting in terms of scrutiny or analysis."

The downside to giving to a major trust or umbrella organization is that they often support other well-known non-profits, not some of the more grass-roots and smaller groups, he said.

Ultimately, McWhorter encourages people to report any fraudulent requests to the Attorney General's Office.