

Consumer **ALERT**



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

Give Wisely to Organizations Claiming to Benefit Public Safety Officers

Before donating to an organization that claims to represent law enforcement, Texans should ask questions and check the facts. Donations to groups with the words “police,” “law enforcement,” or “trooper” in their names may not actually benefit real peace officers or their families. As with most things, the devil is in the details.

Two common types of organizations can serve law enforcement. The first are legitimate charities, such as police benevolent societies. These charitable organizations might honor outstanding officers with an annual gala or raise money to provide scholarships for the children of wounded or fallen officers. However, when an unknown caller solicits donations for a peace officers’ charity, Texans need to ask questions before they open their wallets.

In 2003, the Office of the Attorney General and the Harris County Attorney’s Office filed an enforcement action against the Texas Police Officers Alliance (TPOA), which collected nearly \$300,000 that it claimed would benefit peace officers. Before the state intervened, TPOA had given a paltry \$500 to benefit the families of three sheriff’s deputies. Texans who want to donate funds to law enforcement charities should know how the organization will spend their money – and whether it will actually benefit any peace officers.

A second type of law enforcement organization is a non-profit professional association or labor union. Their membership is usually comprised of dues-paying peace officers who rely on the association for professional insurance, legal counsel, and representation before city, county, or state officials. These associations typically are governed by an elected board of directors that includes actual licensed peace officers. Non-executive board members ordinarily receive no compensation, so many organizations rely on a professional staff to administer day-to-day operations at the association.

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Though many of these organizations legitimately represent actual peace officers and their interests, they are not charities. Because they do not serve a charitable purpose, donations to these organizations are not deductible for federal income tax purpose. For the same reason, it is entirely lawful for a law enforcement association to use donations to pay for administrative expenses, provided they do not mislead prospective donors about how contributions will be spent.

To separate organizations that actually serve or represent peace officers from those that may not, it helps to examine the size of an organization's membership, the composition of its governing board, its history, its affiliations, and the organization's willingness to disclose how it spends its resources.

The state's largest peace officers' organization is the **Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas (CLEAT)**, a labor union with more than 15,000 members and 100 local associations. Founded in 1974, CLEAT is governed by a 17-member elected board of directors that are all licensed peace officers. It is affiliated with the National Coalition of Public Safety Officers.

Another prominent law enforcement association, the **Texas Municipal Police Association**, represents more than 13,000 Texas peace officers. Its 14-member board of directors, which is elected by its membership, receives no compensation and is composed almost entirely of licensed peace officers. Other examples of well-known, established organizations that represent peace officers include the **Fraternal Order of Police**, the **Houston Police Officers Union**, and the **Dallas Police Association**, among others.

While some organizations rely largely on membership dues to fund their operations, others solicit contributions by telephone and mail. Unfortunately, a few organizations that claim to represent law enforcement may not actually spend donors' contributions on items that directly help Texas peace officers.

Consider, for example, the **Texas State Troopers Association (TSTA)**, which hires professional telemarketers to call potential donors for contributions. While the paid solicitor might have a good sales pitch urging potential donors to support the state police, much of the money raised by TSTA doesn't actually go to officers or their families. According to a recent IRS filing by the TSTA, its telemarketing efforts yielded \$3.59 million through telephone solicitations. Of that amount, more than 75% – or \$2.78 million – was spent on “professional fundraising fees.” The IRS documents also indicate the organization spent just \$10,800 on trooper death benefits; \$22,000 on a “trooper event;” and \$72,000 on contract lobbyists.

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Texans who are solicited for donations by a purported law enforcement association need to ask tough questions before contributing to any non-profit organization. If the solicitation is made by telephone, prospective donors should take their time and ask for more information. Consumers should ask whether solicitors are volunteers or paid telemarketers. If a solicitor claims that a state or local police department has authorized the solicitation or will somehow benefit from a contribution, citizens should contact the local police department to determine whether the caller's claim is accurate.

To understand how their contribution will be used, prospective donors should ask the organization to provide a written comparison of how much donated revenue goes to telemarketing or lobbying expenses and how much directly benefits peace officers or their families.

Prospective donors should be wary of high-pressure sales tactics or unsolicited "pledge" letters. The Office of the Attorney General has received complaints by citizens who received unsolicited "pledge letters" from certain organizations. These letters claim that the recipients "generously agreed to donate" a certain amount when, in fact, no such promise was ever made. Texans should also question solicitors who imply their organization's donors receive special treatment by law enforcement authorities. And, of course, no legitimate public safety organization would intimidate or harass consumers who decline to give.

Consumers who receive bogus pledge cards or harassing telephone calls from organizations claiming to benefit law enforcement may file a complaint with the Office of the Attorney General by calling (800) 252-8011 or visiting our Web site at www.oag.state.tx.us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Greg Abbott". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Greg Abbott
Attorney General of Texas

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