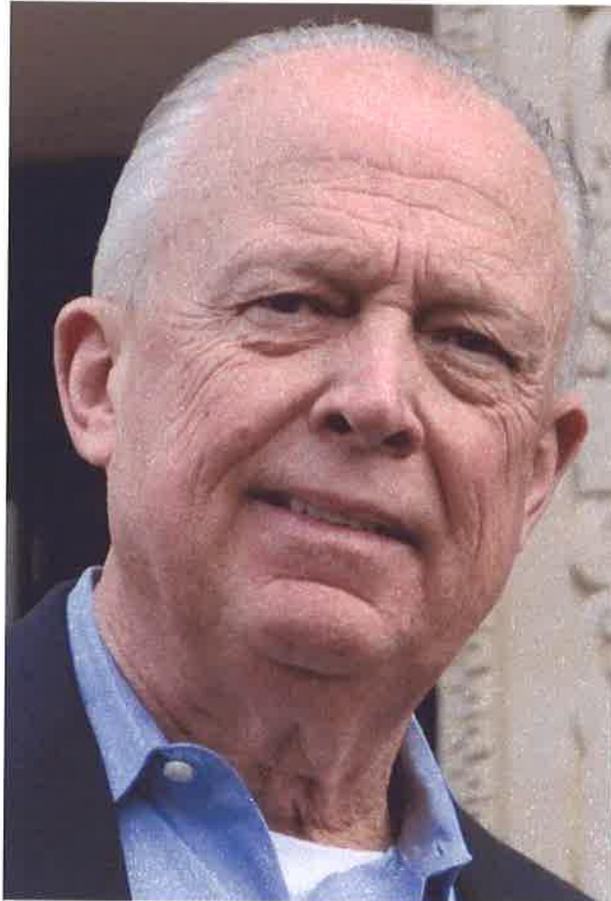


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## Richard Eckstrom Guest Column: Vets' charities are a good way to say 'thanks.' But be cautious

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Richard Eckstrom

At first glance, they appear to be the noblest of causes. Their brochures feature images that tug at the heartstrings – perhaps a uniformed man in a wheelchair, or a tearful widow accepting a folded U.S. flag. They use patriotic-sounding names like “Honor America’s Veterans” or “Salute our Soldiers.”

But too often, so-called “charities” purporting to help veterans and their families fall far short of the charitable image they put forward.

Independent watchdog groups in recent years have called out many veteran-oriented nonprofits, which

are notorious for squandering hundreds of millions of dollars annually on administrative costs, salaries, benefits, and perks. In extreme cases, more than 90 percent of donations raised goes toward overhead – while vets themselves receive what's left over.

To be sure, all types of charities can be vulnerable to “bad apples,” which range from careless business models to outright scams. But veterans have always occupied a special place in our hearts, because we're grateful for the tremendous sacrifices they've made on our behalf. And, unfortunately, our deep well of gratitude and goodwill can make us unsuspecting targets for those seeking easy cash.

A common denominator among the bad apples is their use of for-profit fundraisers like telemarketers and mailing firms, which can skim off as much as 80 percent of the funds they raise. “A small percentage of something is better than 100 percent of nothing,” the president of one “charity” told the online veteran-issues publication VetLikeMe. Still, it's outrageous when someone intends to give \$20 to a cherished cause and, in reality, a mere \$4 or less of their donation goes to the cause.

Some examples are downright disgusting. Like the Center for American Homeless Veterans, whose 2015 IRS filings showed it raised \$2.5 million in donations while its expenses consumed all it raised – including paying its director \$340,000 – according to the watchdog group Center for Public Integrity.

And the American Veterans Foundation, which raised \$6.5 million from 2014 to 2016 but spent 92 percent of it on professional fundraisers and salaries for its president and his son, according to a federal complaint filed last month.

And Help the Vets, which, according to the Military Times, spent 95 percent of the \$20 million it raised from 2014 to 2017 on fundraising, overhead, and its president's salary and benefits.

With so many groups with similar sounding names, finding a trustworthy organization to support can be confusing. Fortunately, several charity watchdogs – including Charity Navigator ([charitynavigator.org](http://charitynavigator.org)), Charity Watch ([charitywatch.org](http://charitywatch.org)), and the BBB Wise Giving Alliance ([give.org](http://give.org)) – want to help ensure your donation will be put to good use. These charity watchdogs evaluate national charities, rate them on the percentage of revenue applied toward the intended purpose, and sometimes publish lists of the best and worst.

Charities with consistently outstanding ratings include:

- The Gary Sinise Foundation ([garysinisefoundation.org](http://garysinisefoundation.org)), the charity founded by the actor-director-musician which provides programs serving wounded veterans, current military members, and first-responders.
- The Fisher House Foundation ([fisherhouse.org](http://fisherhouse.org)), which provides free housing to families of service members in military hospitals and VA medical centers.

- **Soldiers' Angels** ([soldiersangels.org](http://soldiersangels.org)), whose programs include support for homeless and low-income veterans and care packages for current military members.
- And my favorite, **Honor Flight** ([honorflight.org](http://honorflight.org)), which flies WWII, Korean War or Vietnam veterans to Washington, D.C., to view national monuments erected in their honor. I've had the opportunity to volunteer with Honor Flight, and it's a wonderful tribute that stirs the hearts of veterans.

Charity watchdogs also recommend doing your own research before donating to any group. Check the group's website for information about what it does, a list of its board of directors, and its latest financial reports.

Look for charities that spend 75 percent or more on "program expenses" rather than on fundraising, administration, or salaries.

And they advise skipping the telemarketers and giving directly to a charity to ensure a third party doesn't consume a huge chunk of your donation.

If you're seeking information on a South Carolina group, the S.C. Secretary of State's website ([scsos.com](http://scsos.com)) might be helpful. Inputting the organization's name should tell you the percentage of its revenue that goes toward "program expenses."

We admire our vets. Yet some need more than admiration. They need help. What better way to honor their service than to donate to a charity that serves their needs – and to donate wisely.

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