

# CHICAGOLAND

## GIVING TUESDAY

# How to make sure your donations go to a good cause

By Sylvan Lebrun  
Chicago Tribune

While charities in Chicago and beyond prepare for the approach of Giving Tuesday, a global day of charitable giving that takes place on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, local authorities are urging donors to take steps to ensure their money is going to legitimate change-making organizations.

Cases of charity fraud tend to increase in Illinois during the holiday season amid occasions such as Giving Tuesday and the end-of-year rush of donations to qualify for tax deductions, according to watchdog organizations.

The worldwide Giving Tuesday initiative raised over \$3.1 billion in charitable giving in the U.S. alone in 2023, with over 34 million Americans participating, according to the GivingTuesday Data Commons.

"With there being a lot of money involved ... with that comes the scammers," said Steve Bernas, president and chief executive officer of the Better Business Bureau of Chicago and Northern Illinois. "What the Better Business Bureau has seen in the past are fake charities that will be created, or no charity at all and just saying that they're basically a charity, to try to take advantage of peoples' good willing feeling, especially during the holiday season."

For local charitable organizations such as the animal shelter nonprofit PAWS Chicago, Giving Tuesday and the weeks that follow typically bring the greatest fundraising yield of the year.

"The bulk of our fundraising happens during this period for the whole year," said PAWS Chicago Chief Executive Officer Susanna Wickham. "Having a strong Giving Tuesday to kick off the holiday giving season allows us to know that we're able to fund our homeless pet hospital 365 days a year, because it's critically important to us."

However, scammers and



Becky Murrow plays with Lydia, a mixed breed puppy, on Monday at PAWS Chicago Lincoln Park Adoption Center. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

fraudulent charities may try to take advantage of this day of generosity, as Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul warned of in a consumer alert on Monday urging donors to thoroughly research any organizations they give to.

In addition to seeking money from unwitting donors, scammers may also try to trick them into providing sensitive personal information, Bernas said.

Individuals impersonating charities can easily set up GoFundMe pages and share those links on social media, potentially purporting to be connected to well-known and established nonprofits, according to Mason Wilder, research director for the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners.

"In this day and age, it's never been easier to impersonate an organization or a person," Wilder said. "Before you pay any money or transfer any money or conduct a financial transaction online, it's really important to just take a moment and think about it and look into it to make sure that you're not falling

victim to a scam."

### Tips for avoiding charity scams

Raoul recommends that potential donors thoroughly research charities on their own and ask questions before donating any money, including about how much of their donation will go to charitable programming as compared to being used to pay for fundraising or administrative costs.

All charitable organizations and fundraisers are required under Illinois law to register with the attorney general's office annually. Key information about any registered charity, including financial reports, can be viewed on an online database run by the attorney general's office, as well as on platforms such as Charity Navigator and Guidestar.

The Internal Revenue Service also has a search tool where donors can verify an organization's tax-exempt status.

Even when seeing social media posts or donation links for a reputable charity that one is familiar with, Wilder emphasized

that donors should independently verify the legitimacy of the fundraisers through the organization's "actual website" and other official channels.

"Just take a couple minutes to think through what is being presented to you, and potentially find the official sources for those organizations or causes," Wilder said. "If you just take a pause and think about it and be a little skeptical, do a little bit of due diligence, you should be able to avoid scams."

Jeffrey Gawel, chief information and technology officer for the nonprofit United Way of Metro Chicago, told the Tribune in an email that the organization encourages its donors to "be diligent and take steps such as researching charities online via Charity Naviga-

tor, checking that websites are secure before giving online, and reporting any scams to the Federal Trade Commission."

On Giving Tuesday, United Way plans to hold a care kit packing event for individuals and families experiencing food insecurity with more than 100 volunteers from BMO.

Donors should request written information about the organization's mission and plans for distributing donations, as well as written proof that their contribution is tax deductible, according to Raoul.

However, the website of a "responsible" charity should already include key facts such as its mission, programs, finances, measurable goals and concrete achievements, according to the Better Business Bureau.

"Donate only when your questions have been answered and you are certain your money will be used according to your wishes," Raoul wrote in Monday's release.

The sentimental nature of the holiday season may also bring more "emotional pleas to donors," according to the Better Business Bureau. They recommend avoiding donating on-the-spot when receiving urgent and emotionally charged requests from unfamiliar organizations.

"A legitimate charity will want your money today, they'll want it tomorrow, they'll want it next year," Bernas said. "A scammer wants your money within 30 minutes. They take nothing for granted. They don't want you to look them up, they don't want you to think about it."

If an individual soliciting donations uses "high-pressure tactics," requests cash

payment or insists on sending someone to retrieve the donation in-person, no donations should be made, according to Raoul. Such tactics are "hallmarks of a scam," he wrote.

Donors should pay close attention to the names of charities, as scammers may try to mislead them by using names that look similar to those of legitimate organizations, according to Raoul.

Any donations should be paid by check, credit card or any other method of payment "for which you will have a record," Raoul added. Checks should be written out to the full official name of the charity without any abbreviations.

Payments in cash, or through apps such as Venmo or Zelle, should be avoided, according to Raoul. An organization requesting the use of unconventional payment methods such as gift cards or wiring money is also a major red flag, according to Bernas.

When receiving any solicitations for donations, individuals should keep detailed notes of the date and time of the call, the organization's name, the name of the solicitor and any other "pertinent information" about their pitch, according to Raoul.

Perhaps the best way to know where your donations are going on Giving Tuesday, Wickham said, is to give to nonprofits within the community.

"You see the work of the nonprofits in your own community, and the best place to start is where you've actually seen the results," Wickham said.

Suspicious solicitations for charitable donations can be reported by calling the attorney general's office's Charitable Trust Bureau at 312-814-2595.

## Spyropoulos promises to modernize Cook County court clerk's office

By A.D. Quig  
Chicago Tribune

Quoting Greek philosophers and pledging to "drag the office into the modern age," Mariyana Spyropoulos was ceremonially sworn into her new role as Cook County's Circuit Court clerk on Monday.

Spyropoulos beat incumbent Clerk Iris Martinez in the Democratic primary with promises to be more transparent, ethical and fiscally responsible than previous clerks, cruising to an easy victory in November. The office of about 1,400 employees is the keeper of records for criminal, civil, juvenile and traffic courtrooms across the county. It has long been criticized as a patronage den that's also difficult for the public to navigate.

"The clerk's office is the front door to our justice system. I pledge today to keep that door open to everyone: not just for those who know how to navigate the system, but the woman seeking protection from her abuser, the man hoping for an expungement to start a new life, and the newly arrived family navigating an unfamiliar world," Spyropoulos said Monday in a brief speech in the lobby of the Daley Center.

She said she would review how to shorten lines, ensure clear directions and compassionate help for people seeking records or navigating the county's courthouses. Excessive paperwork, she said, was "drowning" lawyers, victims, defendants and the public.

She was officially sworn



Chief Judge Timothy Evans ceremoniously swears in new Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Mariyana Spyropoulos at the Daley Center, Monday. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

in Sunday, but got the ceremonial treatment by Chief Judge Timothy Evans on Monday.

A longtime member of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District board who won the endorsement of the county's Democratic Party, Spyropoulos largely funded her own campaign to defeat Martinez. She played up her time as an assistant state's attorney and her reform credentials, saying she helped bring MWRD under the independent oversight of the county's inspector general. She has pledged to do the same at the clerk's office, which is currently overseen by a clerk-appointed inspector.

Pledging to adhere to the highest ethical standards has become a familiar refrain for court clerks. Martinez made the same promise in 2020 when she replaced Dorothy Brown, whose tenure was scarred by accusations of bribery and taking campaign cash from

her own employees.

Martinez, too, took donations and campaign help from her own employees.

"I pledge to create a strong, independent inspector general to identify and root out corruption," Spyropoulos said Monday. "We deserve no less in our justice system, and our office will not be a paper tiger. I will hold all staff to the highest ethical standards. There can be no favorites. Mark my words: no one is protected from the consequences of their actions. The clerk's office is not a political operation, it is a cornerstone."

On the campaign trail, Spyropoulos also said she would push a change in state law to make the office subject to freedom of information act requests and in the meantime, voluntarily release information on the clerk's spending and case statistics. Martinez made the same FOIA promise in 2020 but backtracked after pushback from judges.



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