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Donate to local animal shelters

By: Jack Hubbard

Michigan residents give billions of dollars to charity every year. But in some cases, donors are being misled or confused by national charities with ambiguous advertising.

A new report published by my organization, the Center for the Environment and Welfare, pulls back the curtain on two notable offenders in the animal space.

Michigan donors should beware.

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) — which are thought to be the country's two premier charities that care for pets — are not what they seem. Despite similar sounding names, neither organization is affiliated with local animal shelters, humane societies or SPCAs.

According to recent public polling, name confusion is running rampant. Roughly 8 in 10 adults wrongly believe these two national organizations are umbrella groups that represent thousands of local pet shelters across the country. In reality, HSUS doesn't operate a single one while the ASPCA runs an adoption center in Manhattan, 800 miles away.

Local shelters across the country are barking mad about the brand confusion. For example, while under the stewardship of now Vice President Kamala Harris, the California Attorney General's office received a formal complaint from the State Humane Association of California. Why? Because ASPCA fundraising was effectively diverting dollars into their own bank account that would have arguably supported California pet organizations otherwise.

The state group's executive director noted, "[o]ur member humane societies and SPCAs frequently report hearing from people who gave to the ASPCA believing they were giving to their local shelter. These shelters believe they are missing out on funds that were intended for them."

Beyond not actually being affiliated with local shelters, financial support of local pet shelters by these two groups is

also extremely underwhelming. According to tax documents, HSUS gives just 1% of its \$138 million budget to pet shelters as financial grants. Meanwhile, the ASPCA only contributes about 2% of its \$302 million budget.

Despite state residents generously supporting both HSUS and the ASPCA, both organizations' most recently available financial records (2021) show that little cash support went to any of the many shelters in the state that support thousands of displaced pets.

Michigan is not alone. It's a dubious pattern that is playing out across the country. Overall, pet shelters in 32 states reportedly received zero cash grants from HSUS in 2021. Twenty-one states got the same neglectful treatment from the ASPCA, according to their own tax documents.

It begs the question: If the lion's share of spending doesn't support local shelters, where does the money go?

A significant portion of donor contributions goes toward fundraising, self-promotion, and other expenses like executive salaries. ASPCA CEO Matt Bershadker, for example, makes nearly \$1 million a year in compensation. HSUS spends more than \$50 million on fundraising, including \$950,000 on postage and shipping alone.

This isn't to say either organization does nothing good for pets. But Michigan donors hoping to help pet shelters would be much better off giving directly to local groups.

Michigan animal lovers that contribute to HSUS and the ASPCA deserve to know how their donations are being used. Donors that want to help homeless pets in their communities should give directly to their local shelter or rescue. That way, the money can better help shelter pets in the state.

Jack Hubbard is executive director of the Center for the Environment and Welfare and previously served as the COO for the country's first national humane organization.