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Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection Uncovers Political Action Committee engaged in Deceptive Telemarketing Regarding Alleged Donations to Local Volunteer Firefighters

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For Immediate Release: Monday, November 18, 2019

Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection Uncovers Political Action

Committee engaged in Deceptive Telemarketing Regarding Alleged Donations to Local Volunteer Firefighters

Residents in Montgomery County have been receiving deceptive telemarketing solicitations from a fictitious business seeking donations to benefit local volunteer firefighters. The County's Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) has entered into a settlement agreement with the organization making the deceptive calls, but is still urging residents to be aware that the scam has occurred and could be duplicated by others. The settlement includes provisions for scammed residents to receive refunds.

Heroes United PAC, doing business as "Volunteer Firefighters Association," reported collecting \$4.6 million nationwide during the 2018 election cycle, including \$1.7 million in the current cycle. Heroes United PAC and its telemarketing network of vendors used three local maildrops and engaged in caller ID spoofing to mislead consumers into believing that donations would benefit local volunteer firefighters.

Montgomery County's OCP has entered into a settlement agreement in which Heroes United PAC agreed to immediately cease and desist from soliciting consumers in Montgomery County. As part of the settlement, Heroes United PAC will write to all consumers in Montgomery County who made donations since 2017 to offer full refunds. The agreement was signed by Matthew Greenlee and Zachary Bass on behalf of Heroes United PAC. In 2018, the North Dakota Attorney General's Office also entered into an agreement with Heroes United PAC regarding telemarketing violations of North Dakota's "Robo-Caller" law.

According to OCP's research, the fraudulent business model has been, and is currently being, duplicated by other political action committees and telemarketing businesses nationwide.

"These deceptive business practices are a despicable way to exploit our natural desire to financially support those who risk their lives to protect all of us," said OCP Director Eric Friedman. "This and other such businesses operate as political action committees in name only and engage in First Responder Fraud."

According to records maintained by the Federal Elections Commission, more than 90 percent of the donations Heroes United PAC received from consumers was retained by third-party vendors who were paid by the PAC to engage in the telemarketing and solicitation activities. Less than 10 percent of the contributions from consumers was used for any so-called political action.

“Montgomery County is proud to have 19 volunteer fire departments that work with Montgomery County's career firefighters,” said Montgomery County Volunteer Fire Rescue Association President Marcine D. Goodloe. “The valor and reputation of our local volunteer firefighters should not be used by unscrupulous merchants to defraud consumers.”

OCP has written to the Federal Elections Commission requesting that it investigate the operation of the Heroes United PAC and several other PACs registered by Zachary Bass that are doing business as “Association of Police and First Responders,” “United Police Officers Association,” “American Coalition for Injured Veterans,” “Breast Cancer Health Council” and “United Police Officers Association.”

OCP offers the following consumer tips regarding telemarketing calls:

- Do not assume that Caller-ID information on your telephone is correct. It is easy for scammers to falsely make it appear that the call is coming from a local telephone number or from a specific organization.
- Do not be fooled by the name of an organization. It is easy for scammers to do business using deceptive names that make them sound like they are a charity or are affiliated with firefighters, police, or first responders.
- Research the organization before making any donation and avoid donating money to organizations that do not use most of the donation for the actual cause you wish to support. Resource information is provided by an organization called Charity Navigator, which can be found at <https://www.charitynavigator.org/>.
- Ask for written information about the charity, including the name, address and telephone number. A legitimate charity or fundraiser will give out information about the charity's mission, how donations will be used and proof that contributions may be tax-deductible.
- Be skeptical if someone thanks you for a pledge you do not remember making. If you have any doubts about whether you previously made a pledge or previously contributed, check your records. Be on the alert for invoices claiming you have made a pledge. Some unscrupulous solicitors use this approach to get your money by asking you to back that pledge with the actual donation—except no pledge existed.

For additional information about this or other scams, and to file complaints, contact the County Office of Consumer Protection via email at ConsumerProtection@MontgomeryCountyMD.gov or by phone at 240-777-3636.

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