

# STANDARDS FOR CHARITABLE ACCOUNTABILITY

## PREFACE

The BBB Wise Giving Alliance *Standards for Charitable Accountability* were developed to assist donors in making sound giving decisions and to foster public confidence in charitable organizations. The standards seek to encourage fair and honest solicitation practices, to promote ethical conduct by charitable organizations and to advance support of philanthropy.

These standards replace the separate standards of the National Charities Information Bureau and the Council of Better Business Bureaus' Foundation and its Philanthropic Advisory Service that were in place at the time the organizations merged.

The *Standards for Charitable Accountability* were developed with professional and technical assistance from representatives of small and large charitable organizations, the accounting profession, grant making foundations, corporate contributions officers, regulatory agencies, research organizations and the Better Business Bureau system. The BBB Wise Giving Alliance also commissioned significant independent research on donor expectations to ensure that the views of the general public were reflected in the standards.

The generous support of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Surdna Foundation and Sony Corporation of America helped underwrite the development of these standards and related research.

Organizations that comply with these accountability standards have provided documentation that they meet basic standards:

- ♦ In how they govern their organization,
- ♦ In the ways they spend their money,
- ♦ In the truthfulness of their representations, and
- ♦ In their willingness to disclose basic information to the public.

These standards apply to publicly soliciting organizations that are tax exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and to other organizations conducting charitable solicitations. The standards are not intended to apply to private foundations, as they do not solicit contributions from the public.

The overarching principle of the BBB Wise Giving Alliance *Standards for Charitable Accountability* is full disclosure to donors and potential donors at the time of solicitation and thereafter. However, where indicated, the standards recommend ethical practices beyond the act of disclosure in order to ensure public confidence and encourage giving. As voluntary standards, they also go beyond the requirements of local, state and federal laws and regulations.

In addition to the specific areas addressed in the standards, the BBB Wise Giving Alliance encourages charitable organizations to adopt the following management practices to further the cause of charitable accountability.

- ♦ Initiate a policy promoting pluralism and diversity within the organization's board, staff and constituencies. While organizations vary widely in their ability to demonstrate pluralism and diversity, every organization should establish a policy, consistent with its mission statement, that fosters such inclusiveness.
- ♦ Ensure adherence to all applicable local, state and federal laws and regulations including submission of financial information.
- ♦ Maintain an organizational adherence to the specific standards cited below. The BBB Wise Giving Alliance also encourages charities to maintain an organizational commitment to accountability that transcends specific standards and places a priority on openness and ethical behavior in the charity's programs and activities.

## GOVERNANCE AND OVERSIGHT

**The governing board has the ultimate oversight authority for any charitable organization. This section of the standards seeks to ensure that the volunteer board is active, independent and free of self-dealing. To meet these standards, the organization shall have:**

**1. A board of directors that provides adequate oversight of the charity's operations and its staff.** Indication of adequate oversight includes, but is not limited to, regularly scheduled appraisals of the CEO's performance, evidence of disbursement controls such as board approval of the budget and fund raising practices, establishment of a conflict of interest policy and establishment of accounting procedures sufficient to safeguard charity finances.

**2. A board of directors with a minimum of five voting members.**

**3. A minimum of three evenly spaced meetings per year of the full governing body with a majority in attendance, with face-to-face participation.** A conference call of the full board can substitute for one of the three meetings of the governing body. For all meetings, alternative modes of participation are acceptable for those with physical disabilities.

**4. Not more than one or 10% (whichever is greater) directly or indirectly compensated person(s) serving as voting member(s) of the board. Compensated members shall not serve as the board's chair or treasurer.**

**5. No transaction(s) in which any board or staff members have material conflicting interests with the charity resulting from any relationship or business affiliation.**

Factors that will be considered when concluding whether or not a related party transaction constitutes a conflict of interest and if such a conflict is material, include, but are not limited to: any arm's length procedures established by the charity; the size of the transaction relative to like expenses of the charity; whether the interested party participated in the board vote on the transaction; if competitive bids were sought and whether the transaction is one-time, recurring or ongoing.

## MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS

An organization should regularly assess its effectiveness in achieving its mission. This section seeks to ensure that an organization has defined, measurable goals and objectives in place and a defined process in place to evaluate the success and impact of its program(s) in fulfilling the goals and objectives of the organization and that also identifies ways to address any deficiencies. To meet these standards, a charitable organization shall:

**6. Have a board policy of assessing, no less than every two years, the organization's performance and effectiveness and of determining future actions required to achieve its mission.**

**7. Submit to the organization's governing body, for its approval, a written report that outlines the results of the aforementioned performance and effectiveness assessment and recommendations for future actions.**

## FINANCES

This section of the standards seeks to ensure that the charity spends its funds honestly, prudently and in accordance with statements made in fund raising appeals. To meet these standards, the charitable organization shall:

*Please note that standards 8 and 9 have different denominators.*

**8. Spend at least 65% of its total expenses on program activities.**

**Formula for Standard 8:**

$$\frac{\text{Total Program Service Expenses}}{\text{Total Expenses}}$$
 should be at least **65%**

**9. Spend no more than 35% of related contributions on fund raising.** Related contributions include donations, legacies and other gifts received as a result of fund raising efforts.

**Formula for Standard 9:**

$$\frac{\text{Total Fund Raising Expenses}}{\text{Total Related Contributions}}$$
 should be no more than **35%**

**10. Avoid accumulating funds that could be used for current program activities. To meet this standard, the charity's unrestricted net assets available for use should not be more than three times the size of the past year's expenses or three times the size of the current year's budget, whichever is higher.**

An organization that does not meet Standards 8, 9 and/or 10 may provide evidence to demonstrate that its use of funds is reasonable. The higher fund raising and administrative costs of a newly created organization, donor restrictions on the use of funds, exceptional bequests, a stigma associated with a cause and environmental or political events beyond an organization's control are among factors which may result in expenditures that are reasonable although they do not meet the financial measures cited in these standards.

**11. Make available to all, on request, complete annual financial statements prepared in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles.**

When total annual gross income exceeds \$250,000, these statements should be audited in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards. For charities whose annual gross income is less than \$250,000, a review by a certified public accountant is sufficient to meet this standard. For charities whose annual gross income is less than \$100,000, an internally produced, complete financial statement is sufficient to meet this standard.

**12. Include in the financial statements a breakdown of expenses (e.g., salaries, travel, postage, etc.) that shows what portion of these expenses was allocated to program, fund raising and administrative activities.**

If the charity has more than one major program category, the schedule should provide a breakdown for each category.

**13. Accurately report the charity's expenses, including any joint cost allocations, in its financial statements.**

For example, audited or unaudited statements which inaccurately claim zero fund raising expenses or otherwise understate the amount a charity spends on fund raising, and/or overstate the amount it spends on programs will not meet this standard.

**14. Have a board-approved annual budget for its current fiscal year, outlining projected expenses for major program activities, fund raising and administration.**

**FUND RAISING AND  
INFORMATIONAL MATERIALS**

**A fund raising appeal is often the only contact a donor has with a charity and may be the sole impetus for giving. This section of the standards seeks to ensure that a charity's representations to the public are accurate, complete and respectful. To meet these standards, the charitable organization shall:**

**15. Have solicitations and informational materials, distributed by any means, that are accurate, truthful and not misleading, both in whole and in part.** Appeals that omit a clear description of program(s) for which contributions are sought will not meet this standard.

A charity should also be able to substantiate that the timing and nature of its expenditures are in accordance with what is stated, expressed or implied in the charity's solicitations.

**16. Have an annual report available to all, on request, that includes:**

- (a) the organization's mission statement,
- (b) a summary of the past year's program service accomplishments,
- (c) a roster of the officers and members of the board of directors,

**(d) financial information that includes:**

- (i) total income in the past fiscal year,
- (ii) expenses in the same program, fund raising and administrative categories as in the financial statements, and
- (iii) ending net assets.

**17. Include on any charity websites that solicit contributions, the same information that is recommended for annual reports, as well as the mailing address of the charity and electronic access to its most recent IRS Form 990.**

**18. Address privacy concerns of donors by**

**(a) providing in written appeals, at least annually, a means (e.g., such as a check off box) for both new and continuing donors to inform the charity if they do not want their name and address shared outside the organization, and**

**(b) providing a clear, prominent and easily accessible privacy policy on any of its websites that tells visitors**

- (i) what information, if any, is being collected about them by the charity and how this information will be used,
- (ii) how to contact the charity to review personal information collected and request corrections,
- (iii) how to inform the charity (e.g., a check off box) that the visitor does not wish his/her personal information to be shared outside the organization, and
- (iv) what security measures the charity has in place to protect personal information.

**19. Clearly disclose how the charity benefits from the sale of products or services (i.e., cause-related marketing) that state or imply that a charity will benefit from a consumer sale or transaction. Such promotions should disclose, at the point of solicitation:**

- (a) the actual or anticipated portion of the purchase price that will benefit the charity (e.g., 5 cents will be contributed to abc charity for every xyz company product sold),
- (b) the duration of the campaign (e.g., the month of October),
- (c) any maximum or guaranteed minimum contribution amount (e.g., up to a maximum of \$200,000).

**20. Respond promptly to and act on complaints brought to its attention by the BBB Wise Giving Alliance and/or local Better Business Bureaus about fund raising practices, privacy policy violations and/or other issues.**