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EDITORIAL

Even a Penny Helps

We doubt that too many New Yorkers were shocked to be told that the United Homeless Organization, which collects coins in those big blue jugs on card tables in mid-Manhattan, was not a humble charity using direct appeals by disadvantaged workers to aid and empower the poor, but something simpler: a scam. Sidewalk transactions in the city, like sidewalk wristwatches and handbags, usually look more legitimate than they are.

Even so, it was a little jarring to hear the flagrant deceit described by New York's attorney general, Andrew Cuomo, when he sued the group this week. He wasn't saying that too little of the money raised went to good causes, but that none did. All those pennies bought nothing — no soup, no winter coats, no heating oil, no addiction treatment. Nothing went to the poor, Mr. Cuomo said, except what little the workers took home and spent on themselves. Hundreds of thousands of tax-exempt dollars, meanwhile, poured into the pockets of U.H.O.'s founder and director to be spent on cable TV, restaurants, trips and shopping, according to the lawsuit.

And in a city that pounces on parking violators at whack-a-mole speed, it was especially vexing to hear Mr. Cuomo say that U.H.O.'s tables operated openly for years without displaying licenses, just meaningless photocopies of the group's New York State incorporation receipt.

It's galling, but we hope anger doesn't harden any hearts. New Yorkers must not let a scandal leave them cold to real needs. All over the city, as around the country, food pantries are bare. People are living with or

* edging ever closer to hunger. The New York City Coalition Against Hunger reports that there is a "hurricane of suffering," which has been eased but hardly eliminated by a recent surge of federal aid. Last year 69 percent of soup kitchens and food pantries ran short of food, the coalition reported. The figure was 55 percent this year.

People should never be surprised that strangers asking for money could be lying — scammers in Manhattan? Get out! — but that is never a reason to close wallets and pocketbooks to reputable organizations (which can be found through the Better Business Bureau or the attorney general's office in any state). The standard spiel of the U.H.O. guys — even a penny helps — was always true, but it helps to make sure you know where those pennies go.



* THE COALITION IN THE NEWS!

