

SHELLEY MOORE CAPITO, WEST VIRGINIA, CHAIRMAN
SHELDON WHITEHOUSE, RHODE ISLAND, RANKING MEMBER

KEVIN CRAMER, NORTH DAKOTA
CYNTHIA M. LUMMIS, WYOMING
JOHN R. CURTIS, UTAH
LINDSEY O. GRAHAM, SOUTH CAROLINA
DAN SULLIVAN, ALASKA
PETE RICKETTS, NEBRASKA
ROGER F. WICKER, MISSISSIPPI
JOHN BOOZMAN, ARKANSAS
JON HUSTED, OHIO

BERNARD SANDERS, VERMONT
JEFF MERKLEY, OREGON
EDWARD J. MARKEY, MASSACHUSETTS
MARK KELLY, ARIZONA
ALEX PADILLA, CALIFORNIA
ADAM B. SCHIFF, CALIFORNIA
LISA BLUNT ROCHESTER, DELAWARE
ANGELA D. ALSOBROOKS, MARYLAND

ADAM TOMLINSON, REPUBLICAN STAFF DIRECTOR
DAN DUDIS, DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6175

November 20, 2025

The Honorable Richard Grenell
President
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
2700 F Street NW
Washington, DC 20566

Dear Ambassador Grenell:

I write regarding your management of a treasured American institution and memorial.

Originally created in 1958 as the National Cultural Center,¹ the institution you oversee benefited greatly from a \$30 million fundraising campaign led by President John F. Kennedy, Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy, and former President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Mrs. Mamie Eisenhower, reflecting bipartisan support for a world-class performing arts institution in the nation's capital. In 1964, following President Kennedy's assassination, Congress and President Lyndon B. Johnson designated the Center as a living memorial to President Kennedy to honor his lifelong devotion to the performing arts in the United States.²

For over six decades, across eleven U.S. presidential administrations, the Kennedy Center has served as a national symbol of artistic excellence, cultural diplomacy, and bipartisan civic spirit. Its statutory mission is to present performing arts (including music, opera, drama, and dance) from the United States and abroad; promote itself as the National Center for the Performing Arts; ensure high-quality, diverse education and outreach programs; provide facilities for civic activities; and maintain a memorial to President Kennedy.³ As a federally chartered 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the Center is funded by taxpayer dollars and private philanthropy.

The Center's leadership is strictly obligated to uphold rigorous financial stewardship and operational transparency. Any deviation for personal or political gain constitutes a profound betrayal of its mission and the public trust.

As an *ex officio* member of the Board of Trustees of the Kennedy Center and Ranking Member of the Committee on Environment and Public Works Committee, which has jurisdiction over all

¹ Library of Congress, "Government Support for the Arts – Hope for America," *Library of Congress*, accessed November 13, 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/hope-for-america/government-support-for-the-arts.html>.

² John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, "Our Story," John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, <https://www.kennedy-center.org/our-story/>.

³ 20 U.S. Code § 76j.

public buildings owned by the U.S. government, I have ample reason to be concerned by reports and information that cast doubt on your stewardship of the institution. Documents obtained by Environment and Public Works Committee Democratic staff indicate that you have turned the Kennedy Center away from its mission. Contracts, invoices, and facility use agreements reveal that you operate the Center for the enrichment of your friends and acquaintances, to dole out political favors, and as a playground for the President of the United States and his allies.⁴ The Center is being looted to the tune of millions of dollars in foregone revenue, cancelled programming, unpaid use of its facilities, and wasteful spending on luxury restaurants and hotels—an unprecedented pattern of self-dealing, favoritism, and waste, including:

- **Free and exclusive use of the Kennedy Center for FIFA.** As the *Washington Post* reported, according to a contract that Committee staff also obtained, your team granted the global sports organization FIFA free and exclusive use of the entire Kennedy Center campus from November 24 through December 12, 2025.⁵ Internal estimates show that this giveaway will cost the Center \$5,038,444 in direct rental and programming rescheduling losses, internal production labor, contracted services, food & beverage, and equipment rentals.⁶ The documents show that your team also cancelled or rescheduled multiple events that fit the Kennedy Center’s mission to accommodate FIFA.⁷
- **Contracts for your personal friends.** On April 14, 2025, the Center entered into a \$15,000-per-month contract with a former colleague from your tenure as U.S. Ambassador to Germany, to perform “policy research and speechwriting” on your behalf.⁸ It is unclear how this work relates to your role at the Kennedy Center, since the contract is devoid of any detail, nor have you delivered any substantive speeches or remarks that would justify these payments. In May 2025, the Center entered into another \$10,833.33-per-month contract with Jeff Halperin,⁹ Kari Lake’s husband, for “social media capture/editing” services.¹⁰ Mrs. Lake, the Republican nominee for Arizona governor in 2022 and a 2024 U.S. Senate candidate, now serves as a Trump-appointed senior advisor at the U.S. Agency for Global Media and is a staunch Trump ally.¹¹ You and Mrs. Lake frequently appeared alongside one another as surrogates for then-presidential candidate Donald Trump prior to the 2024 election.¹²

⁴ See *Appendix*.

⁵ Janay Kingsberry and Rick Maese, “FIFA Will Use Kennedy Center Free of Charge for World Cup Event, Contract Says,” *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/2025/11/13/fifa-kennedy-center/>; See *Appendix Document 1*.

⁶ See *Appendix Document 3*.

⁷ See *Appendix Document 5, 6*.

⁸ See *Appendix Document 9*.

⁹ See *Appendix Document 10*.

¹⁰ Caitlin Sievers, “Kari Lake Came Close to Conceding Her Senate Loss as Her Husband Aims to Dismiss Defamation Case,” *Arizona Mirror* (November 14, 2024), <https://azmirror.com/2024/11/14/kari-lake-came-close-to-conceding-her-senate-loss-as-her-husband-aims-to-dismiss-defamation-case/>.

¹¹ Jessica Jerreat, “USAGM Announces Kari Lake as Special Adviser,” *VOA News*, February 27 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/usagm-announces-kari-lake-as-special-adviser-/7990843.html>.

- **Lavish meals and entertainment.** Between April 17 and July 2, 2025, your team charged the Center \$10,773.19 for private lunches, dinners, and alcohol purchases unrelated to fundraising or development purposes. Your team charged the Center for “Champagne Service,” multi-bottle wine orders, “VIP Gold Card” privileges, and a multi-hundred-dollar meals at the Center’s restaurant.¹³ Detailed receipts show Nick Meade, Vice President of Governance and your longtime political aide, and Rick Loughery, your Executive Vice President, charged several hundreds of dollars for meals including charcuterie and numerous bottles of rosé. These two also hold leadership positions at political organizations you founded or led, including Fix California and Fix USA.¹⁴
- **Luxury hotel accommodations for friends and staff.** Between April 21 and July 16, 2025, your team charged the Center \$27,185 for Watergate Hotel rooms for new hires and your associates,¹⁵ including Lisa Dale, Ms. Lake’s best friend and newly hired Senior Vice President for Development at the Center; Marlon Bateman, an independent contractor reportedly tasked with staff terminations; and Taylor Strand, Senior Marketing official at the Center and CEO of Magnify Media Partners.¹⁶ We understand these multi-night stays, missed reservation charges, and valet parking expenses to be unprecedented charges to the Center.
- **Discounted rentals to political allies.** Contracts show that the Center extended steep rental discounts to organizations politically aligned with President Trump, including a \$19,820 discount for a NewsNation town hall and a \$21,982.60 discount to the American Conservative Union Foundation for a CPAC summit entitled “The Christian Persecution Summit,” with “waived costs from OOP” (the Office of the President) noted in the contract file.¹⁷

Taken together, these actions display a profound disregard for fiduciary responsibility, established financial controls, and the governance of the Kennedy Center. Neither the Center’s enabling legislation nor appropriate fiduciary management allow the President of the United States or the President of the Center to unilaterally enter into zero-dollar use agreements, extend substantial discounts to politically affiliated entities, or disburse funds for personal or political purposes. These actions betray the purpose set forth by Congress, allowing the Center to become a swamp for cronyism and self-dealing. They are particularly troubling given recent reports that the Kennedy Center is operating over budget among falling ticket sales.¹⁸

¹² Kari Lake and Richard Grenell, “Kari Lake, Richard Grenell Decry Antisemitism at Oct. 7th Remembrance Event in Phoenix, Arizona,” YouTube video, 17:45, posted by Kari Lake, December 8, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-OYb8-G_Po.

¹³ See *Appendix Document 11*.

¹⁴ N. Meade, *LinkedIn* profile, accessed November 13, 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/nmeade417>; Rick L., *LinkedIn* profile, accessed November 13, 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rick-l-160063a>.

¹⁵ See *Appendix Document 12*.

¹⁶ Eric Cortellessa, “How Kari Lake Went From Local Anchor to New Face of the MAGA Right,” *TIME*, October 26, 2022, <https://time.com/6225004/kari-lake-arizona-maga-right-interview/>; Whistleblower Information Provided to Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Minority; Taylor Strand, *LinkedIn* profile, accessed November 13, 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/taylor-strand-63884252>.

¹⁷ See *Appendix Document 7, 8*.

Given the importance of preserving the Kennedy Center's statutory mission, and ensuring public trust in the Center's governance, we request that you provide answers to the following questions and produce the requested documents no later than December 4, 2025:

1. Provide a copy of the Center's complete bylaws, as in effect today.
2. What policies and procedures govern the Kennedy Center's financial management, contracting, expense approval, and ethics standards?
 - a. Provide copies of all policies, procedures, and internal guidance regarding financial management, contracting, expense approval, and ethics or conflict-of-interest standards in effect from February 7, 2025, through the present.
 - b. Describe the process by which contracts for independent contractors, consultants, or personal associates are reviewed, approved, and monitored, including any role played by the Board of Trustees or subcommittees.
 - c. Describe the policies governing reimbursement for travel, meals, lodging, and entertainment, including any limits or prohibitions, and indicate whether these policies were followed in practice.
 - d. Has the Center's General Counsel or any member of the Board of Trustees expressed written or verbal concerns about potential conflicts of interest or misuse of funds to you or other senior staff since February 7, 2025? If so, provide all related internal communications.
 - e. Detail the official process for reporting ethical concerns or suspected financial impropriety by senior leadership, and identify the highest level body (Board, committee, external auditor) responsible for investigating such claims.
3. What contracts or expenditures since February 7, 2025, have benefited individuals personally associated with present Kennedy Center leadership or the President of the United States?
 - a. Identify all instances in which you or senior leadership approved expenditures, contracts, or facility use benefiting such individuals, and provide supporting documentation for each.
 - b. Provide copies of all contracts entered into since February 7, 2025, with individuals personally associated with Kennedy Center leadership, along with corresponding invoices, payment records, and documentation of services rendered.

¹⁸ Travis M. Andrews, Jeremy B. Merrill, and Shelly Tan, "Kennedy Center Ticket Sales Have Plummeted Since Trump Takeover," *The Washington Post*, October 31 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/2025/10/31/kennedy-center-sales/>.

- c. Explain the justification for each such contract, including how the services rendered relate to the Kennedy Center's statutory mission and how performance or deliverables were verified.
4. What expenditures or benefits have been provided to Center staff, contractors, or associates since February 7, 2025?
 - a. Provide detailed records of all expenditures for hotel accommodations, meals, entertainment, and related benefits provided to Center staff, contractors, or associates.
 - b. Explain the justification for providing multi-night hotel accommodation, valet service, alcohol, or luxury meals, and identify who approved each expenditure.
5. What measures are in place to review contracts, expenditures, and facility use?
 - a. Describe any internal or external audits conducted during your tenure regarding contracting, expense reimbursement, or facility use, and provide the findings of those audits.
 - b. Explain the role of the Board of Trustees, including any finance or audit committees, in reviewing and approving contracts, rental agreements, or significant expenditures.
6. What was the process and justification for the Kennedy Center's agreement with FIFA?
 - a. Provide internal cost estimates, scheduling impacts, and any Board discussions or approvals related to zero-dollar use of the Kennedy Center campus for the FIFA agreement.
 - b. Explain the justification for granting rental discounts of zero-dollar access, including how such arrangements were consistent with the Center's statutory mission.
 - c. Reports have suggested that FIFA may consider awarding its "Peace Prize" to former President Trump; please explain whether any such speculation or related communications factored into discussions or decisions regarding the Kennedy Center's partnership with FIFA.
7. How has donor support changed under current leadership?
 - a. Provide the total number of recurring (donated for two consecutive years) major-gift donors who have withdrawn or suspended their financial support since February 7, 2025, and indicate the total value of those commitments.

- b. Identify all new donors solicited by current leadership whose contributions exceed \$50,000, including the amounts pledged to the Kennedy Center and the amounts that have been received to date.
- c. Describe any changes in donor engagement or fundraising strategies implemented under current leadership and explain how these efforts align with the Center's statutory mission and financial management policies.
- d. Identify any new donors whose contributions were solicited or accepted after meetings, events, or communications involving the President of the United States, and indicate whether any of these donors are individuals recently pardoned by the President.

Sincerely,



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator
Ranking Member
Committee on Environment
and Public Works

cc: President Donald J. Trump
Chairman, Kennedy Center Board of Trustees

Sen. Shelley Moore Capito
Chairman, Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works