

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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December 11, 2023

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona:

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is investigating the extent to which the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC or Center) influences federal employees performing their duties on behalf of taxpayers as well as input from federal officials that could affect SPLC decisions to designate groups. To further this investigation, the Committee seeks Department of Education (Department) communications pertaining to the SPLC and its projects.

The SPLC has weaponized its designation of “hate group” to target conservative persons, organizations, and non-profits who hold opposing viewpoints or policy positions. In 2019, a federal judge concluded that the SPLC’s “hate group” label does not “depend upon objective data or evidence” and described the designation as “an entirely subjective inquiry.”¹ Despite this subjective slant, SPLC’s labels have been used in the private sector as a basis for decisions to exclude partnerships with certain groups.²

In addition, White House visitor logs obtained this year reveal that meetings with SPLC officials took place at least eleven times over the past three years.³ A meeting of particular concern to the Committee took place on January 6, 2023, between Susan Corke, the director of the SPLC’s Intelligence Project, and National Security Council counterterrorism director John Picarelli.⁴ Six months after the meeting, Corke made the decision to place multiple parental rights groups on its “hate map” and branded them “antigovernment groups.”⁵ The decision came only a few years after the Biden Administration and the Department of Justice (DOJ) acquiesced to demands of the National School Board Association (NSBA) to investigate parents and

¹ *Center for Immigration Studies v. Richard Cohen, et al.*, No. 19-0087 (D.D.C. Sept. 13, 2019), <https://casetext.com/case/ctr-for-immigration-studies-v-cohen>.

² Avery Hartmans, *Jeff Bezos hinted Amazon might split from the SPLC over designation of extremist groups after pressure from a GOP lawmaker*, Business Insider (July 29, 2020).

³ Tyler O’Neil and Ben Collier, *THE COMPANY YOU KEEP: White House Logs Show Biden Meeting With Far-Left Smear Factory Tied to Terrorism*, The Daily Singal (July 5, 2023).

⁴ Gabriel Hays, *SPLC director who placed parents’ rights group on ‘hate map’ met with Biden counterterror official*, Fox News (June 10, 2023).

⁵ *Id.*

parents' rights activists who had chosen to speak up at school board meetings throughout the country.⁶

The SPLC's "hate group" designation, which, again, is not dependent on "objective data or evidence,"⁷ has inspired violence from left-wing extremists who have targeted organizations based on the SPLC's designation of the organization as a "hate group." For example, on August 15, 2012, Floyd Lee Corkins II targeted the Family Research Council's (FRC) headquarters in Washington, D.C. with plans to carry out a mass shooting.⁸ The FBI learned through its investigation that Corkins used the SPLC's "Hate Map" to identify and target the FRC solely because the SPLC had labeled the FRC as a hate group.⁹ The FRC is a nonprofit organization that advocates for pro-life values and policies that foster religious liberty.¹⁰

Moreover, the SPLC's employees and representatives have demonstrated a pattern of engaging in violent demonstrations in support of leftist causes. In March of this year, an SPLC lawyer was arrested and charged with domestic terrorism pertaining to violence that broke out in Atlanta in relation to protests over a planned training facility for police officers.¹¹ More recently, several employees for the SPLC joined a statement which denounced Israel as an "apartheid state" and blamed Israel for provoking Hamas's terrorist attacks that killed 1,400 Israeli men, women, and children.¹²

The SPLC has a history of using its "Hate Map" and "Hatewatch" blog to target political opponents and conservative organizations. The Center has repeatedly and unilaterally designated established conservative leaders and organizations like Ben Carson, The Heritage Foundation, The Federalist Society, Alliance Defending Freedom, the Family Research Council, Franklin Graham, the Homeschool Legal Defense Association, and others as extremist organizations, despite their established positions within the conservative movement.¹³

In 2019, when claims of a culture of racial discrimination and sexual harassment fostered by SPLC co-founder Morris Dees and senior staff were surfacing within SPLC, former employees came forward and acknowledged that the Center uses its "hate group" designation to

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Emma Colton, *Christian nonprofit Family Research Council remains on SPLC's 'hate map' 10 years after terrorist attack*, Fox News (Aug. 15, 2022).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Vision and Mission Statements*, Family Research Council, <https://www.frc.org/mission-statement> (last visited Aug. 21, 2023).

¹¹ Emma Colton, *Southern Poverty Law Center lawyer arrested, charged with domestic terrorism amid Atlanta 'Cop City' attack*, Fox News (Mar. 6, 2023).

¹² Alana Goodman, *Southern Poverty Law Center Spokesman Signed Letter Blaming Israel For Hamas Terrorism*, Wash. Free Beacon (Nov. 4, 2023).

¹³ *The Truth About the SPLC*, Alliance Defending Freedom, <https://adflegal.org/setting-the-record-straight> (last visited Aug. 31, 2023).

artificially inflate the level of so-called “hate” in the U.S. to increase the likelihood that wealthy donors make a donation.¹⁴

The Committee is concerned and seeks to understand the extent of engagement, influence, and the impact of SPLC within your Department as well as any steps you may be taking to mitigate against it. The American people have a right to know how extensively federal employees are utilizing or disseminating flawed and subjective information that effectively discriminates against them for their First Amendment protected political views.

In order to assist the Committee with its investigation, please provide the following documents and communications as soon as possible but no later than December 27, 2023. The timeframe for this request is January 20, 2021, to the date this request is processed:

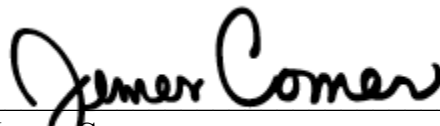
1. All communications between the Department of Education and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), its representatives, or other outside entities pertaining to SPLC;
2. All Department of Education internal communications pertaining to the SPLC, including but not limited to communications addressing the SPLC’s “hate map” and “antigovernment group” designation;
3. All Department of Education communications pertaining to the SPLC’s designation of any parental rights groups as “antigovernment groups” or its placement of any parental rights groups on its “hate map.”

Attached are instructions for producing the documents and information to the Committee. If you have any questions, contact the Committee on Oversight and Accountability Majority staff at (202) 225-5074.

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important investigation.

Sincerely,



James Comer

Chairman

Committee on Oversight and Accountability

¹⁴ Tyler O’Neil, *Conservatives respond as SPLC continues to brand them ‘hate groups’ despite terror attack, defamation claims*, Fox News (Mar. 9, 2022).

Hon. Miguel Cardona
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cc: The Honorable Jamie B. Raskin, Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Accountability