



## A GoFundMe campaign wants to raise money for a border wall. But it isn't that simple

Jessica Estepa and Christal Hayes

December 20, 2018

A GoFundMe campaign so far received more than \$5 million in contributions to a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border – but merely raising the money isn't enough to ensure that it can actually be used for President Donald Trump's long-touted goal.

The campaign, "We The People Will Build The Wall," was started by veteran Brian Kolfage, a Purple Heart recipient and triple amputee who lives in Florida.

"As a veteran who has given so much, 3 limbs, I feel deeply invested to this nation to ensure future generations have everything we have today," Kolfage wrote on the campaign's page. Kolfage, tired of inaction on the wall, started the campaign Sunday and began promoting it Monday.

The goal of the campaign is to raise \$1 billion, one-fifth of the funding that Trump has asked lawmakers for.

"I think it's blowing up," Kolfage told USA TODAY. "People like myself are frustrated, and they want something done. They're passionate about it."

Kolfage said he has spoken to someone in the White House, though he declined to identify who he'd spoken with.

The White House said it's aware of the GoFundMe effort, but officials declined to comment on whether the administration was coordinating with Kolfage on it.

Still, there's a hitch: Sending money to the government isn't as simple as writing a check to the Department of Homeland Security and asking that it be used for border wall construction.

In fact, Homeland Security cannot even accept the money without the explicit approval of Congress. In its policy, the agency cites a federal law that states "gifts may not be accepted, used, or disposed of unless specifically permitted" by Congress.

"Before anything, Congress has to approve it," said David Bier, a policy analyst at the libertarian-leaning CATO Institute. "It's a small amount of money that's not going to make much of a difference but I would be surprised if Congress rejected it."

In its policy issued in 2008, DHS allows officials to "accept and utilize gifts to DHS that aid or facilitate DHS's work," if approved beforehand, but adds that money can't be accepted,

and gifts with conditions attached – such as money specifically used for a border wall – have to be reviewed by the Office of the General Counsel.

Much of the policy is wrapped around ethical concerns and aims to halt outside money from swaying the agency's decisions.

"Congress wants that control over what money is being used for and what agencies are doing so you don't have money coming in from unknown places influencing policy," Bier noted.

DHS did not immediately return a request for comment.

It's not wildly uncommon for private citizens to donate to their government. Under federal law, citizens, as "individuals wishing to express their patriotism," are able to make donations to a general Treasury fund, "Gifts to the United States," but those are general gifts to the government.

Over the years, millions have been donated in hopes of whittling down the national debt. Last year, more than \$775,000 was donated to reduce the debt. In 2012, during the economic crisis, \$7.7 million was donated.

Kolfage noted he hadn't worked out how exactly the money would be delivered to the government and be used for a border wall. He pointed to a \$7.5 million private donation that was used to repair damage to the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C., which is operated by the National Park Service.

In that case, the money was funneled through the Trust for the National Mall, a nonprofit partner of the Park Service.

Kolfage said in his crowdfunding campaign that he was working with Mississippi Rep. Steven Palazzo with legislation that would direct the Treasury Department to turn the money into savings bonds, which would then allow the donations to be used for the border wall.

"This is just one option," Kolfage noted. "There are others on the table being discussed."

And Congress appears to have tried to reconcile the need for legislative action with crowdfunding. Earlier this year, Rep. Diane Black, R-Tenn., introduced a bill that would create a trust fund within the Treasury Department that would "accept public donations to fund the construction of a barrier on the border between the United States and Mexico." Black's office did not immediately return a request for comment.

"Whether it's done with bills or whatever, they can make it happen," Kolfage said.