



Top Republicans demand answers from FBI for 'quasi-investigation' of conservative women's group

Greg Piper

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The FBI used a bureaucratic workaround to investigate a women's group with a socially conservative agenda, despite having no "particular factual predication" for wrongdoing, according to a document disclosed under the Freedom of Information Act.

The revelation outraged top Republicans on the House and Senate Judiciary committees, who are demanding an explanation from FBI Director Christopher Wray.

The July 2016 review of Concerned Women for America (CWA) for the "possibility of fraudulent activity" was based on its two-star rating (out of four) by Charity Navigator, which evaluates nonprofits for their financial health and transparency, according to the FBI "charity assessment."

The redacted FBI form emphasizes that CWA, whose leader was a public supporter of then-candidate Donald Trump, "underperforms most charities in its Cause" by Charity Navigator's standards. It's also listed among "non-disclosure charities" by the BBB Wise Giving Alliance, meaning it didn't consent to evaluation by that charity watchdog.

The FBI reviewer cited redacted "red flags of fraudulent activity" by CWA but concluded it did not merit a full investigation.

"This document raises serious questions about the FBI's targeting of domestic civil society organizations on the basis of a third-party opinion, and not any credible allegation of a crime," House Judiciary ranking member Jim Jordan of Ohio wrote to Wray Wednesday.

"The federal government wields immense surveillance ability and Congress, especially this committee, has an obligation to ensure that it is used properly and in accordance with all laws and regulations," Senate Judiciary ranking member Chuck Grassley of Iowa wrote to Wray July 20.

Both lawmakers pointed to the "intelligence" aspect disclosed on the assessment. While the "embezzlement" aspect is marked unclassified, the intelligence aspect is additionally marked "for official use only." The acronym FOUO is crossed out on the document.

Grassley's letter requested a response by Aug. 3, which his office has yet to receive, spokesperson Taylor Foy told Just the News. The Justice Department did not answer a query Wednesday about its response to the lawmakers.

The FBI turned over the redacted CWA assessment last month in response to a lawsuit by the libertarian Cato Institute this spring seeking information on its use of assessments.

Then-Attorney General Michael Mukasey created this "bureaucratic exercise in legerdemain" in 2008 in the name of preventing terrorism, according to Cato Senior Fellow Patrick Eddington, a former CIA analyst. All that's needed to launch an assessment is an "authorized purpose."

Agents have "broad powers" to engage in "fishing expeditions" of people and groups for First Amendment activities "without having hard evidence that someone has or is about to commit an actual federal crime," he wrote.

The CWA assessment — the result of "an FBI agent looking to meet a quota" — should spur Congress to ban such "quasi-investigations" and find out how many other domestic organizations were subject to spurious FBI reviews, Eddington wrote in an Orange County Register op-ed.

Penny Nance, CWA president and CEO, said she believed her "personal support for Donald Trump for President was the only reason for this investigation."

The group, which "protects and promotes Biblical values and Constitutional principles," has always supported law enforcement and intelligence agencies but now feels betrayed by them, she said.

"The Biden Administration must work to reestablish the American people's trust in our top law enforcement agencies which is at an all-time low," Nance said. "We call on Congress to clamp down on the out-of-control intelligence community."

In his letter Wednesday, Rep. Jordan said the CWA assessment calls into question the FBI director's recent testimony. Wray told the House Judiciary Committee that his agency uses "proper predication" to launch investigations and avoids "First Amendment groups" or their members.

Jordan asked Wray for an unredacted copy of the CWA assessment and a staff briefing on its history, as well as unredacted copies of all charity assessments and an "accounting" of all assessments since January 2016.

Grassley made similar requests in his letter, which invoked the FBI's Crossfire Hurricane investigation of Trump-connected individuals and botched probe of convicted sex offender and former USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar. These investigations show it has "repeatedly failed in its mission and abused its authority."

Charity Navigator told Just the News its ratings are "unbiased and objective," based on public data including Internal Revenue Service filings and "news reports from credible news agencies."

While it's "honored that governmental agencies are referencing our data," Chief Relationship Officer Kevin Scally encouraged the feds to "also consider additional data points when assessing if an investigation is warranted."

Eddington, the Cato scholar, told Just the News the group has appealed the FBI's "withholdings" from the CWA request to the Justice Department's Office of Information Policy.

He emphasized the FBI has historically targeted groups on the political left "by orders of magnitude" more than those on the right. While the "pattern is holding steady" from the information Cato has collected thus far, the FBI holds "literally millions of historical records" that could complicate that pattern if revealed.