



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20463

September 15, 2022

ADVISORY OPINION 2022-17

Kate Sawyer Keane, Esq.
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Washington, D.C. 20002

Dear Ms. Keane and Ms. Mahmood:

We are responding to your advisory opinion request on behalf of Warren Democrats, Inc. (the “Committee”) concerning the application of the Federal Election Campaign Act, 52 U.S.C. §§ 30101-45 (the “Act”), and Commission regulations to the proposed use of campaign funds to pay for the costs of reasonable cybersecurity measures to protect Senator Elizabeth Warren’s home network, which connects to her electronic devices and to the devices of other members of, and visitors to, her household, from cyber threats Senator Warren faces in her role as an elected official. The Commission concludes that the Committee may use campaign funds to pay for the costs of reasonable cybersecurity measures to protect the Senator’s home network without such payments constituting an impermissible conversion of campaign funds to personal use, under the Act and Commission regulations.

Background

The facts presented in this advisory opinion are based on your letter received on July 15, 2022, and on public disclosure reports filed with the Commission.

The Committee is registered with the Commission as the principal campaign committee of Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, who is running for re-election in 2024.¹ While your letter does not report any specific threats against Senator Warren’s personal electronic

¹ See Statement of Organization (FEC Form 1), Warren Democrats, Inc. (March 23, 2020), <https://docquery.fec.gov/pdf/575/202003239215621575/202003239215621575.pdf>; Statement of Candidacy (FEC Form 2) (March 23, 2020) <https://docquery.fec.gov/pdf/485/202003239215620485/202003239215620485.pdf> (last visited Aug. 1, 2022).

devices or accounts, you state that as an elected official, the Senator “faces threats greater than those faced by the general public, including heightened vulnerability to cyberattacks against their electronic devices and accounts.”² You cite news accounts from 2018 and 2020 reporting that email accounts of Senators and other senior government officials have been targeted for hacking, and a POLITICO article written this year containing reports of similar incidents worldwide accompanied by predictions that such incidents will occur in the future.³

You also cite materials associated with the Commission’s consideration of a previous advisory opinion request submitted by Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon in 2018.⁴ Among these are: (1) a letter from Michael Rogers, then director of the National Security Agency, stating that the personal devices and accounts of senior U.S. government officials “remain prime targets for exploitation;”⁵ (2) testimony of Dan Coats, former Director of National Intelligence, that “[t]he personal accounts and devices of government officials can contain information that is useful for our adversaries to target;”⁶ and (3) the opinion of Professor Thomas Rid, a cybersecurity expert at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies, that “the personal accounts of Senators and their staff are high-value . . . targets” because they “contain highly sensitive information about officials’ activities, private communications, family life, finances and movements.”⁷

You propose to use campaign funds for professionally managed security services to provide ongoing network monitoring, patch management, backup management, and remote incident remediation services to ensure overall home network security.⁸

Question Presented

May the Committee use campaign funds to pay for the costs of reasonable cybersecurity measures to protect the Senator’s home network, which connects to the personal electronic

² AOR001.

³ AOR002.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Advisory Opinion 2018-15 (Wyden), AOR002.

⁶ *Id.*; AOR008.

⁷ Advisory Opinion 2018-15 (Wyden), at 4.

⁸ AOR004. You represent that the Senator will continue to pay personally for internet services to her home, AOR002, which, the Commission assumes, subsumes the basic cost of providing and maintaining the home network. Thus, the Commission understands the scope of this request to extend solely to the incremental costs associated with providing the proposed cybersecurity-focused services for the home network. *See* Matter Under Review 7763 (Casper for Colorado), Factual and Legal Analysis, at 4, 11 (Jan. 18, 2022); Conciliation Agreement, at 4 (May 31, 2022) (candidate committee’s use of campaign funds to pay Comcast bills for internet service to personal residence constitutes *per se* personal use under 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g)(1)(i)(E) as payment for utility).

devices of members of, and visitors to, the Senator's household, as well as to those of the Senator herself?

Legal Analysis

Yes, the Committee may use campaign funds to pay for the costs of reasonable cybersecurity measures to protect the Senator's home network. Such expenses fall within the ordinary and necessary expenses incurred in connection with the duties of the Senator as a holder of federal office.

The Act and Commission regulations permit a federal officeholder to use campaign funds for a variety of enumerated purposes, including for "ordinary and necessary expenses incurred in connection with duties of the individual as a holder of Federal office,"⁹ and for "any other lawful purpose" that does not constitute conversion of campaign funds to "personal use."¹⁰ Conversion to personal use occurs when a contribution or amount is used "to fulfill any commitment, obligation, or expense" of a federal officeholder "that would exist irrespective" of the officeholder's duties.¹¹

The Act and Commission regulations provide a non-exhaustive list of items that would constitute a prohibited personal use *per se*, none of which applies here.¹² For items not on this list, such as, in this case, payments for cybersecurity measures to protect a home network connecting to personal electronic devices, the Commission determines on a case-by-case basis whether such expenses would fall within the definition of "personal use."¹³ The Commission has long recognized that if a candidate or federal officeholder "can reasonably show that the expenses at issue resulted from campaign or officeholder activities, the Commission will not consider the use to be personal use."¹⁴

The Commission has issued several advisory opinions authorizing the use of campaign funds for various residential home security upgrades in order to protect against threats to officeholders' physical safety, on the grounds that the need for such security expenses would not exist if not for the officeholders' activities or duties. In Advisory Opinion 2022-02 (Steube), Advisory Opinion 2020-06 (Escobar), Advisory Opinion 2011-17 (Giffords), Advisory Opinion 2011-05 (Terry), and Advisory Opinion 2009-08 (Gallegly), members of Congress faced specific and ongoing threats to the safety of themselves and their families. The facts presented in those advisory opinions suggested that the threats were motivated by the requestors' public roles as

⁹ 52 U.S.C. § 30114(a)(2); 11 C.F.R. § 113.2(a).

¹⁰ 52 U.S.C. § 30114(a)(6), (b)(1); 11 C.F.R. § 113.2(e).

¹¹ 52 U.S.C. § 30114(b)(2); *see also* 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g).

¹² *See* 52 U.S.C. § 30114(b)(2)(A)-(I); 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g)(1)(i)(A)-(J).

¹³ 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g)(1)(ii). *See also* Advisory Opinion 2018-15 (Wyden) at 3.

¹⁴ Personal Use of Campaign Funds, 60 Fed. Reg. 7862, 7867 (Feb. 9, 1995).

federal officeholders, candidates, or both. The Commission concluded in each instance that the expenses for the proposed security upgrades would not have existed irrespective of the requestors' duties as federal officeholders or candidates. Therefore, the Commission concluded that the use of campaign funds to pay for the security upgrades was permissible under the Act and Commission regulations.¹⁵

The Commission has also previously concluded that the heightened threat environment faced by members of Congress necessitated increased residential security measures even if an individual member has not received direct threats. In Advisory Opinion 2017-07 (Sergeant at Arms), the Commission considered information from the House Sergeant at Arms about the threats faced by members of Congress due to their status as federal officeholders, and the recommendation of the Capitol Police that members of Congress install or upgrade residential security systems to protect themselves and their families. In light of that information, the Commission concluded that certain costs of installing or upgrading home security systems would constitute ordinary and necessary expenses incurred in connection with members' duties as federal officeholders, and that therefore members of Congress may use campaign funds to pay for reasonable costs associated with home security systems.¹⁶

In Advisory Opinion 2018-15 (Wyden), the Commission concluded that a United States Senator's use of campaign funds to pay for cybersecurity measures for that Senator's personal electronic devices and accounts would constitute ordinary and necessary expenses incurred in connection with his duties as a federal officeholder because the Senator faced a heightened threat of cyberattacks "with respect to [his] personal electronic devices and accounts by virtue of [his] role as a federal officeholder."¹⁷

As in Advisory Opinion 2018-15 (Wyden), Senator Warren is currently subject to heightened cybersecurity threats due to her role as a federal officeholder. Specifically, "both the heightened risk to Senators' personal electronic devices and accounts and the magnitude of the potential harm would not exist if not for their roles as federal officeholders."¹⁸ In order to protect her personal devices and accounts from heightened cybersecurity threats, Senator Warren

¹⁵ See Advisory Opinion 2022-02 (Steube) at 5 (approving use of campaign funds for the cost of a locking steel security gate at the officeholder's residence); Advisory Opinion 2020-06 (Escobar) at 3 (approving use of campaign funds for wiring and lighting costs necessary for the operation of the residential security system); Advisory Opinion 2011-17 (Giffords) at 3 (approving use of campaign funds for installing improved exterior lighting, improved locks, and a duress alarm button); Advisory Opinion 2011-05 (Terry) at 4 (approving use of campaign funds for installation of an exterior closed circuit television monitor); Advisory Opinion 2009-08 (Gallegly) at 4 (approving use of campaign funds for non-structural upgrades to home security system).

¹⁶ Advisory Opinion 2017-07 (Sergeant at Arms) at 3; *see also* Advisory Opinion 2022-02 (Steube) at 5; Advisory Opinion 2020-06 (Escobar) at 3.

¹⁷ Advisory Opinion 2018-15 (Wyden) at 4; *see also* Advisory Opinion 2021-03 (NRSC and NRCC) at 3 (concluding that Members of Congress may use campaign funds to pay for bona fide, legitimate, professional personal security personnel to protect themselves and their immediate families due to threats arising from their status as officeholders).

¹⁸ Advisory Opinion 2018-15 (Wyden) at 4.

wishes to purchase enhanced cybersecurity measures for her home network to which those devices and accounts are connected. Although family members and visitors to Senator Warren's home may also connect their personal devices to Senator Warren's home network and thus derive the benefit from the enhanced network security protections, any such benefit to others would be merely incidental to the expense of securing Senator Warren's own electronic devices and accounts from cybersecurity threats.¹⁹ As you observe in your request, once security devices or improvements are installed in or around the home, the benefits of such devices necessarily extend to other members of the household and visitors to the home. The fact that others will inevitably benefit from such measures, however, has not precluded the Commission from concluding that the use of campaign funds to install such residential security measures is not personal use.

For instance, the installation or enhancement of a residential home security system as in Advisory Opinions 2009-08 (Gallegly), 2011-05 (Terry), 2011-17 (Giffords), and 2020-06 (Escobar), or a locking steel gate securing an officeholder's residence, as in Advisory Opinion 2022-02 (Steube), likewise provide incidental security protections to other members of the household and visitors and yet the Commission found them to be necessary expenses incurred in connection with the federal officeholders' duties. Similarly, here, the fact that others may incidentally benefit from the home network cybersecurity measures does not alter the conclusion that protecting Senator Warren's home network is necessary to protect her own personal devices and accounts, which the Commission previously recognized is an expense that does not constitute personal use.²⁰ Thus, so long as the benefits accruing to household members and visitors required by the protection of the home network are incidental,²¹ the Commission concludes that the Committee's proposal to make reasonable cybersecurity improvements to the home network will not result in impermissible personal use because such expenses would be ordinary and necessary expenses incurred in connection with the Senator's duties as a federal officeholder.²²

¹⁹ In Advisory Opinion 2018-15 (Wyden), the Commission stated that the permissible use of campaign funds "is limited to [the Senator's] own personal devices and accounts and not available for devices and accounts of family members, staff, or other persons." *Id.* at 4. Here, although family members and other persons may derive a temporary and incidental security benefit while those devices are connected to Senator Warren's home network, no campaign funds would be used to secure the actual devices and accounts of family members or other persons.

²⁰ As in prior advisory opinions regarding the installation or upgrading of residential security measures, the Commission assumes for the purpose of this advisory opinion that to the extent that the proposed cybersecurity measures involve physical enhancements to Senator Warren's home, they would not be "structural" and would not be intended to improve the value of the home. *See, e.g.*, Advisory Opinions 2020-06 (Escobar) at 3; 2017-17 (Sergeant at Arms) at 3; 2011-17 (Giffords) at 2.

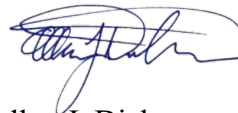
²¹ For example, the Commission assumes that the protection afforded to the devices of persons other than the Senator would be limited to the perimeter of the Senator's home and for the time within which such other persons are within the home.

²² 52 U.S.C. § 30114(a)(2). As in Advisory Opinion 2017-07 (Sergeant at Arms), at 3 n.4, the Commission assumes that in paying for the costs of reasonable cybersecurity measures for the Senator's home network, the Committee will pay the fair market value of such measures to avoid receiving potentially impermissible in-kind contributions from vendors.

Accordingly, the Commission concludes that the Committee may use campaign funds to pay for the costs of reasonable cybersecurity measures to protect the Senator's home network.

This response constitutes an advisory opinion concerning the application of the Act and Commission regulations to the specific transaction or activity set forth in your request.²³ The Commission emphasizes that, if there is a change in any of the facts or assumptions presented, and such facts or assumptions are material to a conclusion presented in this advisory opinion, then the requestor may not rely on that conclusion as support for its proposed activity. Any person involved in any specific transaction or activity which is indistinguishable in all its material aspects from the transaction or activity with respect to which this advisory opinion is rendered may rely on this advisory opinion.²⁴ Please note that the analysis or conclusions in this advisory opinion may be affected by subsequent developments in the law including, but not limited to, statutes, regulations, advisory opinions, and case law. Any advisory opinions cited herein are available on the Commission's website.

On behalf of the Commission,



Allen J. Dickerson,
Chairman

²³ See 52 U.S.C. § 30108.

²⁴ See 52 U.S.C. § 30108(c)(1)(B).