



February 5, 2021

**VIA EMAIL**

Senator Alberta Darling  
Room 122 South  
Wisconsin State Capitol  
Madison, WI 53703  
[Sen.Darling@legis.wi.gov](mailto:Sen.Darling@legis.wi.gov)

**Re: Public Records Law Request**

Dear Senator Darling:

Pursuant to Wisconsin's public records law, Wis. Stat. §§ 19.31–19.39, American Oversight makes the following request for copies of records.

Following the 2020 elections, President Trump's campaign requested recounts in Wisconsin's Milwaukee and Dane Counties, a process that slightly increased then-President-Elect Joe Biden's lead in the state.<sup>1</sup> On December 11, 2020, after the conclusion of the recount, the state legislature's Joint Committee on Finance chose to withhold funds for conducting the recounts from these two counties, citing an unexplained objection from an unidentified member of the committee.<sup>2</sup> On January 8, 2021, the committee approved the \$2.4 million reimbursement, with committee leaders expressing satisfaction with receipts provided by both counties.<sup>3</sup>

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on the decision of the Joint Committee on Finance to withhold funds from Milwaukee and Dane Counties, including what factors may have influenced the committee.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Marley, *GOP Committee Withholds Payments to Dane and Milwaukee Counties for Recount Costs*, Milwaukee J.-Sentinel (updated Dec. 11, 2020, 7:04 PM), [https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/12/11/republicans-withhold-trump-recount-funds-milwaukee-dane-counties/6514385002/?itm\\_medium=recirc&itm\\_source=taboola&itm\\_campaign=inter nal&itm\\_content=RightRailArticleThumbnails-Redesign](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/12/11/republicans-withhold-trump-recount-funds-milwaukee-dane-counties/6514385002/?itm_medium=recirc&itm_source=taboola&itm_campaign=inter nal&itm_content=RightRailArticleThumbnails-Redesign).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell Schmidt, *State Budget Committee Releases Election Recount Funds for Dane and Milwaukee Counties*, Wisc. State J., Jan. 9, 2021, [https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/elections/state-budget-committee-releases-election-recount-funds-for-dane-and-milwaukee-counties/article\\_8293a514-72cd-52be-894d-f83257b3587e.html](https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/elections/state-budget-committee-releases-election-recount-funds-for-dane-and-milwaukee-counties/article_8293a514-72cd-52be-894d-f83257b3587e.html).



## **Requested Records**

American Oversight requests that your office produce the following records “as soon as practicable and without delay”:<sup>4</sup>

All communications (including emails, email attachments, draft agreements, memoranda, and proposals) between (a) Sen. Darling or her chief of staff, Jerry Ponio, and (b) the following Wisconsin state officials:

1. Wisconsin Elections Commission Administrator, Meagan Wolfe
2. Commissioner Dean Knudson (including at [dean.knudson@wisconsin.gov](mailto:dean.knudson@wisconsin.gov), [dean.knudson@wi.gov](mailto:dean.knudson@wi.gov), [dknudson@comcast.net](mailto:dknudson@comcast.net), [dean@deanknudson.com](mailto:dean@deanknudson.com), or any other known email address)
3. Commissioner Robert Spindell (including at [robert.spindell@wisconsin.gov](mailto:robert.spindell@wisconsin.gov), [robert.spindell@wi.gov](mailto:robert.spindell@wi.gov), [cd4.chairman@wisgop.info](mailto:cd4.chairman@wisgop.info), or any other known email address)
4. Wisconsin State Assembly Speaker, Rep. Robin Vos
5. Chief of Staff to Speaker Vos, Jenny Toftness
6. Rep. Mark Born
7. Chief of Staff to Rep. Born, Nicole Borgerding
8. Sen. Howard Marklein
9. Chief of Staff to Sen. Marklein, Katy Rusch Prange

Please provide all responsive records from November 3, 2020, through January 11, 2021.

## **Fee Waiver Request**

In accordance with Wis. Stat. § 19.35(3)(e), American Oversight respectfully requests that the records be produced without charge. Providing American Oversight with a waiver of fees is in the “public interest” because American Oversight will, in accordance with its organizational mission, make the records available to the public without charge. These disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public.

American Oversight’s work is aimed solely at serving the public interest. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight’s financial interest. Rather, American Oversight’s mission is to serve the public by promoting transparency in government, educating the public about government activities, and ensuring the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media.<sup>5</sup> American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public

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<sup>4</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.35(4)(a).

<sup>5</sup> See generally *News*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>; *State Investigations*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/states>; see, e.g., *State Government Contacts with Voting-Restriction Activists*, American Oversight,

website<sup>6</sup> and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>7</sup>

The public has a significant interest in the Joint Committee on Finance’s decision to withhold reimbursement for vote recounts in Milwaukee and Dane Counties.<sup>8</sup> Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the government, including whether the committee members withheld funds based on partisan motivations or other influences. American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses agencies provide to public records requests publicly available, and the public’s understanding of the government’s activities would be enhanced through American Oversight’s analysis and publication of these records.

American Oversight asks that if its request for a fee waiver is denied in whole or in part, that you contact us prior to incurring any costs.

### **Guidance Regarding the Search & Processing of Requested Records**

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the term “record” in its broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles, telephone messages, voice mail messages and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

Please search all locations and systems likely to have responsive records regarding official business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Emails conducting government business sent or received on the personal account of the authority’s officer or employee constitutes a record for purposes of Wisconsin’s public records laws.<sup>9</sup>

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<https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/state-government-contacts-with-voting-restriction-activists>; *Wisconsin Documents Offer Window into Early Uncertainty over COVID-19*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/wisconsin-documents-offer-window-into-early-uncertainty-over-covid-19>.

<sup>6</sup> *Documents*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/documents>.

<sup>7</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 15,600 page likes on Facebook and 105,600 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Feb. 1, 2021); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Feb. 1, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> *See, e.g.*, Schmidt, *supra* note 3.

<sup>9</sup> Wisc. Dep’t of J., *Wisconsin Public Records Law Compliance Guide*, Oct. 2019, at 3, <https://www.doj.state.wi.us/sites/default/files/office-open-government/Resources/PRL-GUIDE.pdf>.

In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records.<sup>10</sup> If it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

Please take appropriate steps to ensure that records responsive to this request are not deleted by the agency before the completion of processing for this request. If records potentially responsive to this request are likely to be located on systems where they are subject to potential deletion, including on a scheduled basis, please take steps to prevent that deletion, including, as appropriate, by instituting a litigation hold on those records.

### **Conclusion**

If you have any questions regarding how to construe this request for records or believe that further discussions regarding search and processing would facilitate a more efficient production of records of interest to American Oversight, please do not hesitate to contact American Oversight to discuss this request. American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and your agency can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in an electronic format by email. Alternatively, please provide responsive material in native format or in PDF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, please contact Emma Lewis at [records@americanoversight.org](mailto:records@americanoversight.org) or 202.919.6303. Also, if American Oversight's request

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<sup>10</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.36(6).

for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

/s/ Emma Lewis

Emma Lewis  
On behalf of  
American Oversight