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One Hundred Nineteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
www.foreignaffairs.house.gov

May 4, 2026

The Honorable Marco Rubio
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Rubio,

I am writing to request information about the State Department's relationship with the Ben Franklin Fellowship (BFF) non-for-profit charitable organization. Specifically, there is a troubling lack of transparency about the Department's placement of BFF fellows across the agency, its apparent support of the BFF U.S. National Interest Diplomacy Awards (USNIDA), and any role BFF plays in safeguarding sensitive agency information. The Committee on Foreign Affairs has primary jurisdiction in the U.S. House of Representatives to conduct oversight of the State Department, and our legislative purpose in seeking this information is to determine whether the Department is complying with applicable U.S. laws and regulations, including regarding merit-based personnel practices, acceptance of outside compensation or gifts by federal employees, and handling of internal Department information.

As of the date of this letter, 25 of 92 Ben Franklin Fellows whose biographies are publicly included on the BFF website¹ appear to hold senior roles in the State Department, including Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau; officials in the Offices of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, Policy and Planning, and Civil Rights, as well as the Bureaus of Consular

¹ Ben Franklin Fellowship, "Fellows," accessed April 30, 2026, <https://www.benfranklinfellowship.org/fellows>.

Affairs; Population, Refugees, and Migration; and Global Food Security; and leadership at multiple U.S. embassies around the world. The BFF website² further indicates that fellows join the organization through private invitation. This raises several concerns, including that federal employees will feel compelled, pressured, or otherwise coerced into supporting BFF and its mission as a litmus test to receive an invitation for membership and/or gain professional opportunities.

In his testimony³ before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on July 15, 2025, Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Michael Rigas described the Ben Franklin Fellowship as an “affinity group” that “is not an official State Department organization.” However, BFF’s website⁴ claims that the organization “fills a need that is not addressed... by any specialized ‘affinity groups’ at the State Department...” Moreover, the organization’s website⁵ claims that the USNIDA awards are occurring in “partnership” with the State Department and notes that the “The State Department will help BFF publicize the program by means of a Department Notice, ALDAC messages to posts, and similar communication tools.”

The USNIDA offers a total of \$25,000 in cash to eligible State Department Foreign and Civil Service employees across seven award categories, outlined on BFF’s website⁶, that all describe work State Department employees are already obligated to carry out as part of their official duties. The source(s) of these cash awards are unclear, as is how the USNIDA award complies with U.S. laws and regulations to prevent corruption, conflict of interests, and undue influence on government employees.⁷ If the USNIDA is intended to award State Department employees for work done beyond the scope of their official duties, such a distinction is woefully unclear. Additionally, all cash awards or gifts over \$200 can only be accepted if an agency ethics official issues a written determination that the award is part of an established recognition program with regular standards and funding; it is unclear whether such a determination has been made.

Finally, BFF has publicly announced⁸ that it is “monitoring and exposing the unauthorized disclosure of sensitive State Department information to the media,” inviting “Department colleagues” to submit anonymous tips to a non-U.S. government email address. As it has traditionally been the purview of the Department’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security to safeguard

² Ben Franklin Fellowship, “About,” accessed April 30, 2026, <https://www.benfranklinfellowship.org/about>.

³ U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee (Democrats), “FY26 State Department Posture: Management and Resources,” July 15, 2025, <https://democrats-foreignaffairs.house.gov/2025/7/fy26-state-department-posture-management-and-resources>.

⁴ Ben Franklin Fellowship, “About.”

⁵ Ben Franklin Fellowship, “Issues,” accessed April 30, 2026, <https://www.benfranklinfellowship.org/issues>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ 18 U.S.C. § 209, “Salary of Government Officials and Employees Payable Only by United States” (prohibiting federal employees from receiving supplemental compensation from nonfederal sources), *U.S. Code*, accessed April 30, 2026, [https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=\(title:18%20section:209%20edition:prelim\)](https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=(title:18%20section:209%20edition:prelim)); 5 C.F.R. pt. 2635, subpt. B, “Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch” (prohibiting federal employees from accepting any gift for their official position, or from a prohibited source), *Code of Federal Regulations*, accessed April 30, 2026, <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-5/chapter-XVI/subchapter-B/part-2635>.

⁸ Ben Franklin Fellowship, “Issues.”

sensitive or classified agency information and to investigate any improper handling of such information, this announcement raises questions as to whether the Department is coordinating with or utilizing a private non-governmental organization to these ends.

Congress requires immediate clarification on the State Department's official relationship with BFF, including the Department's role in identifying or elevating BFF fellows and supporting – in time, resources, or funding – any aspect of the USNIDA and other BFF activities.

I respectfully request the following information by May 22, 2026:

1. A full, written accounting of the relationship between the State Department and BFF, including the terms of the partnership described on the BFF website.
2. A full, written accounting of the terms and conditions of the USNIDA awards, and description of any role the State Department is playing to facilitate such awards.
3. All Department records referring to or related to the Designated Agency Ethics Official (DAEO) or DAEO designee's determination that the USNIDA awards comply with existing laws and Department ethics regulations governing gift rules for federal employees, including the Department's review of the BFF's 990 filing with the Internal Revenue Service as a non-profit entity.
4. A full, written accounting of the Department's determination that BFF is an affinity group, as Deputy Secretary of State Michael Rigas referred to BFF in Congressional testimony on July 15, 2025, and how such a determination was made.
5. All Department records referring to or related to the legal justifications used to determine that BFF is permitted to supplement the salaries of federal employees for their official duties through cash awards valued over \$200.
6. All Department records referring or related to any changes in policies taken under the Trump Administration governing affinity group activities, including related to cash awards and gifts.
7. A full, written accounting of the Department's compliance to date with 18 U.S.C. 209, and 5 C.F.R. 2635 Subpart B, and an assessment of whether BFF's USNIDA awards are an attempt to influence U.S. Civil and Foreign Service employees.
8. All Department records referring to or related to any proposals or plans from BFF outlining detailed standards and criteria for awardees, including the standards for selection of award recipients for each of the seven awards categories.
9. All documents BFF provided to the Department referencing its funding sources, donors, and future awards or defined commitments that will secure USNIDA funding at present and in the future.

10. A full written accounting of the relationship between the State Department and BFF, including the role of Diplomatic Security, related to the monitoring of sensitive information and identification or publicizing of the names of any State Department employees regarding their handling of such information.

I appreciate your attention and cooperation in ensuring that all State Department personnel processes and activities comply with the law and applicable ethics regulations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gregory W. MEEKS". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping underline that extends to the left and right of the name.

GREGORY W. MEEKS
Ranking Member