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Attorney General Keith Ellison: My meeting before Feeding our Future raid was routine

My door is open in good faith to constituents with concerns. That's my job. In this case I listened carefully, I didn't make promises. There was much more information to come.





By Keith Ellison

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A week after FBI agents raided the offices of Minnesota nonprofit Feeding Our Future after accusations the group's partners defrauded the federal government of millions of dollars, evidence of the raid is seen in the offices Jan. 27, 2022, in St. Anthony, Minn. (Shari L. Gross/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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I've dedicated over 20 years of my life to serving Minnesotans, and in every position I've operated with the same philosophy: I'll always meet with and listen to my constituents.

In a time when elected officials routinely avoid meeting with and listening to the people they serve, it's still my practice that if a constituent has a concern, my door is always open and my phone is always on. I take hundreds of meetings each year, including with people who disagree with me. I ask questions, do my best to understand where folks are coming from, and try not to judge before I know the facts. That's the job, and I take it seriously. More politicians should.

Which brings me to a meeting I attended in December 2021 ("AG, fraudsters met in 2021 before raids," April 16). If you read nothing else in this piece, here's what you need to know: I took a meeting in good faith with people I didn't know and some turned out to have done bad things. I did nothing for them and took nothing from them. Some months later, some of them were held accountable for their illegal conduct in the Feeding Our Future case, as well they should have been. I'm glad they were.

That's the big picture. Here are the details.

In December 2021, a friend and member of the clergy asked me to listen to some constituents who said they were small-business owners who were being treated unfairly by the state of Minnesota. These people that I had never met before taped the meeting without my knowledge.

These folks were professional scammers. They tried to run the same persuasion game on me that they had been perfecting for over a year – one they'd used to try to fool state agencies, the media and courts – using outrageous claims of discrimination as a pretense to cover for their scheme to defraud the federal government, and steal vital funds from a program designed to feed hungry kids during the pandemic. Sometimes they succeeded in fooling people about who they really were and the crimes they were really up to.

The people in that meeting sounded sympathetic, so I took notes and said I'd look into their concerns but made no promises. Being the scammers they were, they even suggested that if I helped them, they'd contribute to my campaign. I shut that down immediately. As the Minnesota Star Tribune writes in its own [article](#), I "did not ask for money or offer any quid pro quo." This comes through loud and clear on the recording, and I'm glad it does. And when I got back to my office and checked with my team, I learned that the "complaints" they raised with me were part of an FBI investigation into Feeding Our Future.

At the time of this meeting, Feeding Our Future still wasn't a household name. By state law, the Attorney General's Office is the lawyer for more than 100 state agencies and other entities. We have thousands of cases and investigations open at any time. In December 2021, staff attorneys in my office had been defending the Minnesota Department of Education against a shameful lawsuit Feeding Our Future had brought against it, claiming that MDE had discriminated against them in withholding payments. Knowing what we know now about Feeding Our Future, you would have thought this lawsuit would be easy to beat, but at the time they had convinced a court that MDE was in the wrong: The court had slapped a contempt order and fines on MDE, and the lawsuit was still in full swing. And, of course, we all now know that Feeding Our Future was very good at scamming people.

For quite some time, the lawsuit between Feeding Our Future and MDE looked like a routine dispute between a community organization seeking reimbursement and an agency doing its due diligence. Clearly, we know now that what Feeding Our Future was up to was far from routine. But it wasn't until a month after this December 2021 meeting that the scandal started to take shape in earnest.

In January 2022, a month after the meeting, my office got our first indication from the FBI of the scale of Feeding Our Future's illegal conduct. Until then, the FBI had not shared with my

staff attorneys anything about the size of their investigation or the individuals they were targeting. The first federal search warrants were issued that same month. The first federal indictments came down eight months later.

My team put in a lot of work in our lane of this case, defending MDE against Feeding Our Future's spurious civil lawsuit. We also put in our share of support for the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice as they worked their lane – criminally investigating and prosecuting federal fraud of federal dollars. We stepped up when they asked and actively helped the FBI and DOJ protect the secrecy of their investigation. Once the search warrants were executed in January 2022, and the sheer scope of the fraud was made public, my office stepped into our lane and used our civil enforcement authority to start investigating and shutting down the so-called charities that had participated in it and start shutting down Feeding Our Future as an organization.

The criminal fraud the Feeding Our Future defendants committed was brazen and shameful. All Minnesotans and all Americans can be grateful to federal law enforcement for using their authority in criminal law to hold them accountable for stealing federal money. As attorney general, I've been using the tools of my office to fight fraud for years – whether that's successfully prosecuting Medicaid fraud and recovering \$53 million in the last five years, or recovering tens of millions of dollars from scammers and shady operators for Minnesota families and seniors from all kinds of scams.

What's also brazen and shameful is how readily the people I met with used false claims of racism to try and prop up their failing scams. It's particularly enraging to me, someone who's worked toward racial justice for most of my life, to see supposed community advocates flat-out steal from communities of color and taxpayers, then cry racism when others rightly sensed something was wrong. It's appalling and hurts the cause of justice.

And as for the meeting – if I had had any way of knowing beforehand who those people were and what they’d done, I never would have agreed to it. But I’m not going to stop meeting with folks in good faith because a few bad people tried – and failed – to run their scheme on me. I’m going to keep listening to my constituents, I’m going to keep asking the right questions, and I’m going to keep working hard to protect the people of Minnesota.

Keith Ellison is Minnesota’s attorney general.

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