

The Columbus Dispatch

NEWS

Elon Musk targets Lutheran groups' federal funding. Here's how the money is used in Columbus



Danae King

Columbus Dispatch

Published 3:23 p.m. ET Feb. 3, 2025 | Updated 1:47 p.m. ET Feb. 4, 2025

Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio was one of several nonprofit organizations with "Lutheran" in their name that was called out on X, formerly Twitter, by Elon Musk and Mike Flynn over the weekend.

Flynn, who briefly served as national security advisor during the early days of President Donald Trump's first term, posted on X on Saturday night that Lutherans are using "'religion' as a money laundering operation" and that it "must end."

The accusations are "unfounded," said Rachel Lustig, president and CEO of Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio, who also explained how the money is used.

The retired Army Lt. General, who resigned his national security post in 2017 after it was discovered that he was communicating with Russian officials during that nation's cyberattacks on the United States, posted screen shots on X of what appears to be a spreadsheet denoting U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) funding to Lutheran organizations.

In the first of two screenshots, Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio is listed twice, with an amount of \$673,059 noted and dated Dec. 9 and the amount of \$7,488,836.74 dated Jan. 6. It's unclear to what the dates correspond.

Elon Musk, owner of X and CEO of Tesla Motors, quoted Flynn's X post and said "The @DOGE team is rapidly shutting down these illegal payments." He was referring to the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), a group seeking to trim government spending created in Trump's second term and led by Musk.

Flynn's post states that "Lutheran Family Services and affiliated organizations receive massive amounts of taxpayer dollars, and the numbers speak for themselves. These funds, total BILLIONS of American taxpayer dollars."

What the X post doesn't say, however, is what the funding goes toward. There is no mention of the services the varied organizations, which are not related to one another, provide with the federal funding.

Flynn said the "huge sums" the entities in the screenshots get "raise serious questions about how taxpayer funds are being spent and who's benefiting."

Those questions are easily answered, at least locally, with a look into what services Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio provides in Columbus and the region.

How does Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio use federal funding?

Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio, just like many other nonprofits, gets federal funding from several sources, including HHS, which Flynn noted.

The grants specifically mentioned in the images are for the LSS Health Center, Lustig said.

Millions in funding at risk: Columbus nonprofits scramble to deal with potential Trump pause

The health center, located on North Grant Avenue next to the organization's Downtown homeless shelter, Faith Mission, offers health care to people experiencing homelessness and those with low incomes who may have trouble accessing health care.

"We have not received an official notice of a loss of funding," Lustig said. "We at Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio have a long-standing relationship with the government and meet rigorous financial requirements, including an annual independent audit."

The \$7-million figure cited in the post represents seven years of funding, Lustig said, from 2017 to 2024. The LSS Health Center became a federally qualified health center in 2017. The \$673,059 is a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention grant, also for the health center, according to LSS of Central Ohio.

Federally Qualified Health Centers are public health centers with a concentration on

helping at-risk and underserved populations, according to www.medicare.gov.

"We are disappointed unfounded accusations of money laundering can circulate so broadly, but we will stay focused on providing people in need with housing, health care and emergency assistance with dignity and respect," Lustig said.

114 dead, over 8,000 turned away. Why more money for domestic violence services is wanted

LSS of Central Ohio also runs CHOICES, Franklin County's only domestic violence shelter, and Faith Mission, as well as providing emergency assistance and running food pantries locally.

The LSS Health Center began in 1992 as the Obregon Clinic and has expanded over the years into what it is today. The status as a federally qualified health center helped it grow, according to LSS of Central Ohio.

From July 2023 to June 2024, there were more than 7,000 visits to the clinic, with 1,681 patients.

dking@dispatch.com

@DanaeKing