

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 6, 2018

Ms. Helen M. Albert
Acting Inspector General
Office of Inspector General
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
451 7th Street SW
Washington, DC 20410

Dear Inspector General Albert:

We write to express our serious concerns regarding recent reports of expenditures made for the office suite of Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Ben Carson, as well as allegations that HUD officials retaliated against an employee for refusing to engage in suspected illegal activity.¹ We therefore request that the Office of the Inspector General promptly open an investigation into the circumstances involving the expenditures for any furniture for the Secretary's suite, as well as if there were any violations in the use of taxpayer funds for such purchases. Although press reports indicate that HUD canceled the furniture purchase², it is important to understand whether any legal or ethical violations occurred in this process.

According to reports, Helen Foster, then the Chief Administrative Officer for HUD, alleges she was asked on January 19, 2017 by Acting HUD Secretary Craig Clemmensen to assist in obtaining funds for redecorating the secretary's suite for then-HUD Secretary nominee Ben Carson.³ When Ms. Foster informed Clemmensen that the Department was prohibited from spending more than \$5,000 without providing prior notice to Congressional appropriations committees, Clemmensen reportedly said that "\$5,000 will not even buy a decent chair."⁴

As you know, federal law requires advance notice be provided to the Senate and House Committees on Appropriations for any expenditure in excess of \$5,000 to renovate, remodel, furnish, or redecorate the office of a department head appointed by the President.⁵ However, despite Ms. Foster's reported warnings about the Department's legal obligations, HUD officials allegedly ordered a \$31,561 dining-room set for Secretary Carson's office at HUD Headquarters without providing appropriate notice to Congress.⁶ In addition, Ms. Foster has filed a complaint with the Office of Special Counsel alleging that HUD management took retaliatory personnel actions against her for raising concerns about this purchase as well as a \$10.8 million budget shortfall she had identified.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/27/hud-ben-carson-office-redecoration-trump-appointee>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/01/politics/hud-furniture-order-canceled-carson/index.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/27/us/ben-carson-hud-furniture.html>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ P.L. 115-31, Title VII, Section 710.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/27/us/ben-carson-hud-furniture.html>

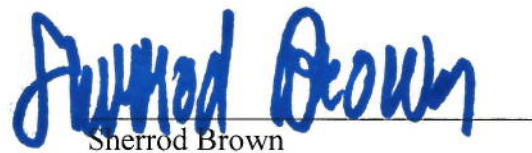
This remarkable expenditure request for a custom and extravagantly expensive hardwood table, chairs, and hutch comes on the heels of the Administration's proposal to slash funding for the Department's budget by \$6.8 billion, a 14 percent decrease from fiscal year 2017 enacted funding levels.⁷ If enacted, the Administration's proposal would disproportionately harm low-income families, seniors, and those with disabilities. Such extravagance also stands in stark contrast with Secretary Carson's views about HUD-assisted housing⁸, which, he stated should not be "a comfortable setting that would make somebody want to say: 'I'll just stay here [...and] they will take care of me.'"⁹

We should accept nothing less than a full and transparent explanation of what happened, whether any violations of ethics rules or law occurred, who is responsible for any violations, and how to prevent such violations in the future. If true, this is exactly the type of behavior that undermines Americans' trust that their government will be an effective steward of their taxpayer dollars. Whistleblowers and federal government employees who expose waste, fraud, and abuse by public officials should be applauded, not retaliated against. We therefore respectfully request that the Office of the Inspector General promptly open an investigation into the allegations involving potential illicit activity regarding HUD official expenses.

We appreciate your timely attention to these potential violations, and we ask that you keep our staff apprised of the progress of your investigation.

Sincerely,


Robert Menendez


Sherrod Brown

⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/budget-fy2019.pdf>; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Addendum-to-the-FY-2019-Budget.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/us/politics/ben-carson-hud-poverty-plans.html>

⁹ Ibid.