



June 1, 2026

Michigan Attorney Grievance Commission
PNC Center
755 W. Big Beaver Rd.
Suite 2100
Troy, Michigan 48084

**RE: Request for investigation into potential ethics violations
by Jocelyn Benson**

Dear Michigan Attorney Grievance Commission,

The people of Michigan rightfully expect an attorney barred in the state to act as a “public citizen having special responsibility for the quality of justice.”¹ Recent investigations into the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) have illuminated a complex web of induced violence, money laundering, and donor deception—all led by an active Board of Directors.² Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson previously served on the SPLC Board of Directors from 2014 to 2018.³ Benson’s ties to the SPLC reach back to 2004 when she volunteered for the SPLC as a researcher and undercover investigator.⁴ Then, Benson posed as a freelance journalist who often met with neo-Nazi and white-supremacist groups.⁵

The SPLC is a non-profit organization headquartered in Montgomery, Alabama, and regularly operates in many states, including Michigan.⁶ The SPLC’s purported mission is to be a “catalyst for racial justice in the South . . . to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance the human rights of all people.”⁷

On April 21, 2026, a federal grand jury returned an indictment charging the SPLC with 11 counts of wire fraud, false statements to a federally insured

¹ Mich. Rules of Pro. Conduct, pml. (“MRPC”).

² United States Department of Justice, “*Federal Grand Jury Charges Southern Poverty Law Center for Wire Fraud, False Statements, and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering*,” April 21, 2026, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-grand-jury-charges-southern-poverty-law-center-wire-fraud-false-statements-and>.

³ Wayne State University Law School, “Jocelyn Benson,” accessed May 28, 2026, <https://law.wayne.edu/profile/ax9860>.

⁴ Lana Barnett, “The battle for the ballot box,” *Harvard Law Bulletin*, August 19, 2021, <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/the-battle-for-the-ballot-box/>.

⁵ H.R. 313, 103d Gen. Assemb., at 2–3 (Mich. 2026).

⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center, “State Support,” accessed May 28, 2026, <https://www.splcenter.org/state-support/>.

⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, “About,” accessed May 28, 2026, <https://www.splcenter.org/about/>.

bank, and conspiracy to commit concealment money laundering. The indictment period includes Benson's tenure on the Board.⁸

In the 1980s, the SPLC began orchestrating a network of covert operatives who joined and encouraged well-known violent or extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and Unite the Right. The SPLC's support for these groups was not exclusively in manpower, however. Between 2014 and 2023, the SPLC funneled more than \$3 million in donated funds to fictitiously named bank accounts controlled by SPLC operatives who joined these violent or extremist groups.⁹

According to the Indictment, the objective of the SPLC was to incite activity in violent or extremism groups in order to provoke larger contributions from donors. The SPLC would then use the violent or extremist groups' "activity" as a basis for making materially false and misleading statements to donors that the SPLC was seeking to inhibit the violent or extremist groups' "activity"—as opposed to funding it.¹⁰

On May 4, 2026, Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier issued the SPLC a 14-page subpoena pursuant to the Florida Deceptive and Unfair Trade Practices Act. The subpoena demands financial records identifying the origin and eventual destination of donated funds.¹¹ Uthmeier added in a news release, "SPLC appears to be running a deceptive organization that pays informants to manufacture racism on its behalf."¹²

Democracy Restored is a nonpartisan organization that exists to educate the public about how its government really works, and how it far too often doesn't work. We work to expose the actions of people, including unelected bureaucrats in our government, that may be influencing policy against the wishes the American people have expressed through their elected representatives.

We are dedicated to protecting the principles of representative democracy by addressing these unelected bureaucrats' influence in our government. We believe that, by promoting awareness, we can all work together to ensure that decision-making power returns to the American people — where it belongs.

Our mission is to bring transparency to those whose actions, unwittingly or not, may be undermining our democracy, often while proclaiming they are protecting it. We work hard to expose the drumbeat of elected officials' responsibilities being handed off to people who do not answer to the American taxpayer. The reins of power belong in the hands of those elected by the people, not those whose work outside of the reach of their bosses — the American people.

⁸ Department of Justice, "Grand Jury Indicts Southern Poverty Law Center."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

At bottom, Benson's ties to, and knowledge of, the allegations against the SPLC need to be investigated as potentially implicating not just criminal law but MRPC rules for attorneys barred in the state. Rule 8.4 states that it is professional misconduct for a lawyer to "engage in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, misrepresentation, or violation of the criminal law, where such conduct reflects adversely on the lawyer's honesty, trustworthiness, or fitness as a lawyer."¹³

Benson's honesty is additionally implicated because in May 2025, the House of Representatives voted to hold Benson in civil contempt for failing to respond to issued subpoenas.¹⁴ Benson's demonstrated history of dishonesty in conjunction with potential fraud during her time with the SPLC "cast doubt on [her] commitment to equal justice under law."¹⁵ The MRPC is especially sensitive to the type of conduct that Benson potentially engaged in or knew of at the SPLC as it would inherently "reflect adversely on [her] fitness to practice law."¹⁶ Finally, failing to respond appropriately do subpoenas also implicates MRPC Rule 8.4(c), which permits discipline for "conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice."¹⁷

As a result of the facts and circumstances discussed above, we believe there is ample evidence to begin an investigation into Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson. The good people and legal professionals of Michigan should learn the degree to which Benson knew about the SPLC orchestrating violence or extremism it purported to decry and to what degree Benson knew about or participated in the donor-deception scheme. The United States and the State of Florida have already taken steps to learn more about the SPLC's donor-deception scheme. Michigan should not be left behind and should instead lead the charge against attorney dishonesty wherever it exists in the state, especially if it dwells with the Secretary of State herself.

Sincerely,

Houston Keene
Director
Democracy Restored
<https://www.democracyrestored.org/>

¹³ MRPC, Rule 8.4(b).

¹⁴ H.R. 313, *supra* note 5, at 4.

¹⁵ MRPC, Rule 6.5, Comment.

¹⁶ MRPC, Rule 8.4, Comment.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*