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Charities Face Backlash Over Galas at Trump's Mar-a-Lago

By Rebecca Koenig



DON EMMERT/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

President Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate is one of the largest venues in Palm Beach, Fla., and regularly hosts nonprofit galas. But since the election, nonprofits with scheduled events there have drawn harsh criticism.

Major charities including the American Red Cross, the Cleveland Clinic, and the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute are drawing protests for going through with scheduled galas at Mar-a-Lago, the Palm Beach, Fla., mansion owned by President Trump.

"We're committed to holding the event this year, and then I think we are very appreciative of the community's concerns and have listened," says Eileen Sheil, executive director of corporate communications for the Cleveland Clinic. "We are discussing the future right now and have no commitment to holding any other event there at this time."

Mar-a-Lago is one of the largest venues in Palm Beach and regularly hosts million-dollar galas for big nonprofits. Its owner's ascension to the White House, and his controversial actions on immigration and other issues, have thrust charities that routinely use the estate into uncharted territory.

A protest march from the Trump Plaza Condos in West Palm Beach to Mar-a-Lago is planned for February 4, the evening of the Diamond

Centennial International Red Cross Ball. March organizers contend that the Red Cross's mission to prevent and alleviate human suffering is at odds with several of President Trump's policies.

Meanwhile, doctors and professors have taken to social media to urge the Cleveland Clinic to cancel its event at Mar-a-Lago on February 25. Their protest has a personal element: A doctor at the hospital who holds a Sudanese passport was forced to leave the country Saturday due to President Trump's executive order barring U.S. entry for visitors from Sudan and six other Muslim-majority countries.

And doctors and students from Harvard Medical School are calling on Laurie Glimcher, chief executive of Harvard-affiliated Dana-Farber, to cancel the institute's February 18 gala at the estate. The cancer center published a statement from Dr. Glimcher and board Chairman Josh Bekenstein Tuesday that acknowledged concerns about the president's immigration order but confirmed that the fundraising event will take place as planned.

"As a cancer-care and research organization, we seek to remain solely focused on our singular mission of hope and progress against this disease," they said.

Difficult to Reschedule

Venues for big charity galas are booked well in advance, and changing an event reservation can carry heavy costs for the hosting nonprofit. And canceling a gala outright can leave a gaping hole in an organization's budget: Dana-Farber raised \$2.3 million at its 2016 gala at Mar-a-Lago, according to the institute's donor report.

"The forthcoming fundraiser in Palm Beach is planned many months in advance, and raises critical funds to support this life-saving work," Dr. Glimcher and Mr. Bekenstein said in their statement. "Contracts have been signed, and a large number of people have committed to attend. Canceling the event outright would only deny much-needed resources for research and care. Other organizations find themselves in a similar position this year and have made a similar decision."

In October, facing pressure from other organizations, breast-cancer charity Susan G. Komen reportedly considered canceling its Mar-a-Lago reservation for a January 14 event because of comments Mr. Trump, then the Republican candidate for president, made about sexually assaulting women.

The charity ultimately kept its reservation. Donna Ross Dodson, a spokesperson for the event, declined to comment.

There's another factor that may have compelled some nonprofits to retain their bookings: tradition. The International Red Cross Ball has been affiliated with Mar-a-Lago since the estate's original owner, philanthropist Marjorie Merriweather Post, hosted the first edition of the event there in 1957.

Trump Ties

Mr. Trump's foundation has given money to nonprofits that hold fundraisers at Mar-a-Lago, including Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, which has honored him with titles such as "Grand Honorary Chair."

Toby Cosgrove, chief executive of the Cleveland Clinic, serves on President Trump's Strategic and Policy Forum, a panel of business leaders who will advise him on economic growth. Mr. Cosgrove turned down the president's request that he head the Department of Veterans Affairs; he also declined when offered the post by President Obama.

Dana-Farber's statement on the upcoming gala did not mention President Trump by name; nor did that of the Cleveland Clinic's Ms. Sheil, who emphasized that "this event is only about us trying to do a good thing and raising money for a good cause, which is cardiac care."

"We certainly don't want to upset our community and our supporters. We're sensitive to that. It's just an unfortunate situation," she said.

But the American Red Cross did not shy away from Mar-a-Lago's associations with Mr. Trump. Rather, the charity is carrying on its tradition of naming the current U.S. president as its honorary chairman.

"President Donald J. Trump has attended the International Red Cross Ball in the past, and we appreciate his support for our work," the nonprofit said in a statement.

The president is scheduled to be at Mar-a-Lago this weekend. The Red Cross declined to say whether he will attend its gala on Saturday.

Send an email to Rebecca Koenig.

