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October 2, 2026

Conflicts of Interest Board
2 Lafayette Street
Suite 1010
New York, NY, 10007

Re: Complaint—Improper Use of Signal by Mayor Mamdani’s Staff

To Whom It May Concern:

This complaint addresses allegations of Mayor Mamdani’s staff reportedly using official Signal accounts to communicate with social-media influencers in violation of New York City Conflicts of Interest Board Rules.

In late August, the *Columbia Journalism Review* released a detailed investigative report identifying that Emilia Rowland, in her official capacity as Mayor Mamdani’s Director of New Media and Cultural Communications, created an official Signal account and thereafter invited a curated list of social-media influencers to the chat.¹

The purpose of the official Signal chat was clear—“to relay talking points to more than 200 social media influencers.”² In fact, that is what occurred. The Mayor’s office commissioned social-media influencers from this Signal chat for “five thousand to twenty thousand dollars per influencer campaign.”³ Public concerns ranged from “peddling propaganda” to simply concealing political information.⁴ At bottom, however, is “the fact that taxpayer money is being spent on campaigns involving influencers” with almost no knowledge of how or why.⁵

Just recently, City Council held an investigative hearing into the matter and lambasted Mayor Mamdani’s office for not sending anyone with actual knowledge of the Signal chat, its contents, or the influencer contracts.⁶

¹ Dr. Anya Schiffrin, “Mayor Mamdani’s Friendly Influencers and the Funding of Public Messaging in New York City,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 31, 2026, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/mayor-mamdani-friendly-influencers-and-the-funding-of-public-messaging-in-new-york-city.php.

² Sahalie Donaldson, “NYC Council grills Mamdani admin over communication with influencers,” *City & State New York*, September 22, 2026, <https://www.cityandstateny.com/policy/2026/09/nyc-council-grills-mamdani-admin-over-communication-influencers/416145/>.

³ Dr. Anya Schiffrin, “Mayor Mamdani’s Friendly Influencers.”

⁴ Sahalie Donaldson, “NYC Council grills Mamdani.”

⁵ Dr. Anya Schiffrin, “Mayor Mamdani’s Friendly.”

⁶ Ibid.



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COIB Rules Sections 1-13(a) and 1-13(b) “prohibit the use of City time and City resources for any non-City purpose.”⁷ “[O]fficial social media accounts are City property.”⁸ It is well established from these Rules that “political activities *always* fall within the prohibition on use of City time or resources.”⁹ Even more unequivocally, the COIB has stated that a city employee may not use official social media, chats, or “resources to schedule campaign events.”¹⁰

New York’s Freedom of Information Law § 86(4) defines “record” as “any information kept, held, filed, produced or reproduced by, with, or for this agency, in any physical form whatsoever including” electronic messages. Documents falling into the definition of “record” are required to be retained.

As Director of New Media and Cultural Communications, Emilia Rowland qualifies as a city employee and is therefore subject to COIB Rules. Additionally, the Signal chat in question qualifies as City property because it is a media account created by a city official for an official purpose. That purpose, however, is one strictly prohibited by this Board.

As well-substantiated public reporting and declarations by the City Council make clear: this Signal chat was used to coordinate political messaging campaigns between Mayor Mamdani’s office and social-media influencers. These campaigns were also financed with taxpayer dollars of amounts varying from a few thousand to tens of thousands of dollars.

The ethical and conflicts-of-interest implications presented by the Mayor’s office’s use of this Signal chat are undeniable. It is contrary to this Board’s Rules (and Advisory Opinions) for city officials in the mayor’s office to use secret Signal chats to orchestrate political campaigns on the taxpayer’s dime. And, the manner in which it was done violates New York’s Freedom of Information Law. Under FOIL, electronic messages are “records” required to be retained, but the use of the Signal chat in question hinged on disappearing messages and unobtainable information.

⁷ City of New York Conflicts of Interest Board, “Advisory Opinion No. 2017-1 (Revised),” May 2, 2017, https://www.nyc.gov/assets/coib/downloads/pdf5/aos/2017/AO2017_1.pdf.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.



The Mayor's office has refused to substantively comply with the City Council's investigative efforts, and very little additional information has been revealed.

This Board is empowered with oversight over conflicts-of-interest issues, and we believe that the tip of the iceberg of information that is already public *itself* likely violates the Board's Rules, but even more egregiously signals a larger swath of prohibited conduct that is currently unknown to the public. For these reasons, we ask that you investigate the Mayor's office regarding the use and purpose of the Signal chat dedicated to soliciting campaigns from social-media influencers.

Sincerely,

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