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WisPolitics.com review: State Patrol hours to protect Barnes skyrocket compared to Kleefisch

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On one day in February, Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes drove to Kenosha, attended a Black History Month event at a school and had lunch in Racine before heading back to Milwaukee, where he started the day.

There, he had a call with the president of the Milwaukee Area Labor Council and by 5 p.m. was headed to dinner at the Mexican restaurant Cielito Lindo.

That day, taxpayers also picked up the tab for the State Patrol to put in 36 hours protecting him — the equivalent of three officers each working 12-hour shifts, according to a WisPolitics.com review.

It was part of a pattern for Barnes over just his first two months in office. The review found the state's Dignitary Protection Unit put in nine times as many hours providing him protection as it did his predecessor during her final full year on the job.

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The Dem's office deferred to the DPU when asked if there was a specific threat to Barnes, the first African American to serve as lieutenant governor, that justified that level of protection. The Department of Transportation, which oversees the DPU, declined to comment, saying it "determined that providing this information would be contrary to ensuring the safety and security of the Lieutenant Governor."

Still, an aide to his predecessor Rebecca Kleefisch said the former lt. guv didn't receive coverage for purely personal events, such as going to church, even at the height of the Act 10 protests.

That doesn't appear to be the case with Barnes, according to the review, which found DPU provided protection for Barnes on seven days over the two-month period in which he had no official public events listed on his calendar. Three of those were Sundays, when the only entry on Barnes' calendar was church. On another, a Saturday, the only entry was a 30-minute phone interview.

Still, DPU put in 18 hours protecting Barnes on one of those Sundays as he went to church with Gov. Tony Evers in Milwaukee and then drove to Madison six hours later, according to his official calendar.

State GOP spokesman Charles Nichols slammed Barnes' use of state protection, particularly considering Dems attacked Gov. Scott Walker during the 2018 campaign as out of touch for his use of state planes to travel across Wisconsin. He said WisPolitics.com's reporting suggested Barnes was using the DPU protection as a "perk."

"DPU coverage is meant for security purposes, not a luxury where Lt. Gov. Barnes can be driven around in the back of a black SUV," Nichols said.

Evers spokeswoman Melissa Baldauff responded, "Safety is not a perk."

The review also found Barnes received protection on a half-dozen days in which the majority of his official scheduled events were either in the Capitol or within a couple of blocks of the building.

He averaged 18.2 hours of protection from the DPU on those days, one of which was his inauguration.

That day, his calendar listed events at the Capitol and the executive residence, along with a private reception for friends and family, the Inaugural Gala and a staff party. Between his first calendar entry at 8 a.m. and the last one at midnight — a span of 20 hours — DPU provided 33.5 hours of protection, suggesting he had more than one officer accompanying him for at least part of the day.

According to the DPU website, it is responsible for providing protection to the guv, as well as the guv's family and staff, whenever they travel away from the Capitol or Executive Residence. While he's at the residence, Capitol Police are responsible for his security and have a post on the grounds that's staffed around the clock.

DPU also provides protection to other elected officials when directed by the State

Patrol superintendent's office, as well as national and international dignitaries visiting Wisconsin on official business. The agency's services also include providing transportation for those they're protecting and reconnaissance at the sites they plan to visit.

WisPolitics.com requested information from the DPU on the days and hours Barnes was provided protection after the lieutenant governor was spotted at what appeared to be purely personal events with State Patrol protection. That request, which spanned immediately after Barnes was elected through March 1, found the first day he received coverage from the DPU was Dec. 28.

WisPolitics.com then matched the DPU records against Barnes' official calendar, which was obtained through an open records request with his Capitol office.

The cost for the nearly 898 hours the DPU logged accompanying Barnes to official, personal and political events totaled $36,662 — more than half of that for overtime — and puts him on pace for nearly $220,000 in protection for the full year.

Meanwhile, Kleefisch received protection on seven days over all of 2018, compared to the 47 that DPU officers accompanied Barnes between Dec. 28 and March 1. The total cost to protect Kleefisch last year was $4,370 for 95.5 hours.

WisPolitics.com also requested mileage records for the transportation provided to Barnes while under DPU protection, but DOT said that is not tracked for a specific protectee. Public officials who receive DPU protection at political events must reimburse the state for those costs, and the share of Barnes' security detail that will be reimbursed wasn't immediately available.

Aide: Kleefisch didn't receive protection for personal events

Kleefisch initially didn't receive protection from the DPU after she took office, but that changed amid the protests over Act 10, said Daniel Suhr, her former chief of staff.

Even then, however, the standard was Kleefisch only received protection at official or political events where she was appearing as the lieutenant governor. That was particularly true for events that had been publicized ahead of time, Suhr said. But she didn't receive coverage for personal events.

Suhr said around the 2014 election, after the furor over Act 10 had largely died

down, Kleefisch switched to receiving protection from Capitol Police rather than DPU officers, in part, because they're paid less. According to DOT, that switched occurred in September 2015.

Then in 2017, the office made a switch again, as the Walker administration put in the budget an additional staffer for the lieutenant governor and $171,800 in taxpayer money on top of the standard budget adjustment.

Suhr said the request was made because it was determined Kleefisch no longer needed regular protection. But the office had become accustomed logistically to having an officer drive her to events in a state vehicle.

He said adding the staffer and using some of the funding boost to lease a vehicle from the state fleet was made to save money.

Still, DOT records show Kleefisch continued to receive occasional DPU protection into 2018.

That includes, for example, 10 hours for an April 2018 fundraiser with Vice President Pence, 34 hours over two days as she attended the GOP state convention last May, and 10 hours for the Foxconn groundbreaking ceremony with President Trump June 28.

She also received protection during the State of the State and two days last summer for Fourth of July parades.

For all of 2017, DPU provided her 170.5 hours of protection.

DOT said the decision to resume daily coverage for Barnes was made in conjunction with the State Patrol and the guv's office.

Suhr, who worked in Walker's office as deputy legal counsel before becoming Kleefisch's chief of staff in 2014, said governors need around-the-clock coverage from DPU not just for protection, but to immediately put them in position to respond to a crisis. He said there isn't a similar demand with the lieutenant governor's job.

"It's really just a question of that protection," Suhr said. "We felt in the Act 10 era that the protection need was very real. But as that era came to a close, we decided to switch back to past practice, which wasn't providing protection on the taxpayer if it wasn't justified."

Records suggest Barnes often accompanied by more than one officer

The Department of Transportation, which oversees the State Patrol, refused to provide details on the number of officers that accompanied Barnes at various events, citing security concerns.

Still, it was clear from several entries that Barnes received protection from more than one officer on a given day.

The DPU reported 44 hours providing protection for Barnes Feb. 24, when he flew to Austin, Texas. There, he met with Mayor Steve Adler as well as officials from a pro-environmental group. He then went to the Texas Legislative Black Caucus luncheon before flying to Minneapolis.

The next day, he attended “Up North” events in Rice Lake, Barron and Cumberland. The following day, he was in Hayward and Springbrook, where he went ice fishing with Rep. Nick Milroy, D-Superior, before later returning to Madison.

Those three days accounted for 105 hours of protection from the DPU.

Similarly, Barnes racked up 94.5 hours over a three-day span in February while in Washington, D.C., for a political trip. On the day he flew back, he attended the 33rd annual Golden Shovel Awards presented by the National Association of Minority Contractors of Wisconsin and the state DOT in Pewaukee, did a reading event in Verona and attended a budget briefing before overnighting in Madison.

Asked for details on both out-of-state trips, Barnes’ office said it had provided WisPolitics.com all the relevant records relating to its request for the lieutenant governor’s official calendar. It also said personal events had been redacted from the calendar and it isn’t in possession of his political calendar.