

SBC legal expenses surpass \$12M in three years

September 18, 2024

NASHVILLE (BP)—The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee reported it has spent more than \$12.1 million on the 2021-2022 Guidepost Solutions investigation into its handling of sexual abuse claims and subsequent legal expenses dating back to 2021.

To cover expenses and operating costs moving forward, the Executive Committee voted in executive session at its September meeting to authorize President Jeff Iorg to execute a loan secured by the SBC Executive Committee building and place the Nashville building on the market.

The release of the detailed financial information was the result of a motion adopted by messengers at this summer's SBC annual meeting.

Executive Committee Finance Committee Chair Adam Wyatt told Baptist Press the funds to cover legal expenses have been taken from the Executive Committee's reserve funds to "protect Cooperative Program dollars" even though the original [motion adopted by messengers at the 2021 SBC annual meeting](#) approved the use of Cooperative Program dollars for the review.

The numbers show the Executive Committee has "done everything in our power to take the burden on ourselves to protect the Cooperative Program and the work of the convention and its entities," Wyatt said. "And it is our effort of trying to just be as transparent and clear about where we really are."

The expense breakdown given to the Executive Committee shows:

- The total cost of the Guidepost Investigation was \$3.1million.
- \$2 million was paid directly to Guidepost to conduct the investigation.
- Legal and task force expenses totaled \$1.1 million.
- The Executive Committee has paid \$3.1 million to indemnify Guidepost.
- The cost of the abuse tipline hosted by Guidepost has been \$861,000. This expense has been reimbursed by Send Relief.

Other legal expenses include:

- Litigation and case management: \$2.4 million
- U.S. Department of Justice investigation: \$2 million
- General counsel: \$571,000
- Post investigation legal support: \$131,000

Messengers to the 2021 SBC annual meeting in Nashville approved a motion calling for an independent, third-party investigation into alleged mishandling of sexual abuse claims by the Executive Committee over a period of 20 years.

The motion also called for the creation of a Sexual Abuse Task Force to oversee the third-party investigation and bring recommendations to the 2022 SBC annual meeting.

That task force [retained Guidepost](#) to conduct the investigation, and the contract signed included a clause indemnifying Guidepost of any legal expenses resulting from its investigation.

The report from the investigation was released in May 2022. An investigation of the SBC by the Department of Justice was announced in July 2022.

Two men named in the Guidepost report later sued both Guidepost and the SBC for defamation—former Georgia pastor and SBC president [Johnny Hunt](#) and former Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professor [David Sills](#).

The Hunt suit in particular has made up the lion's share of litigation expenditures thus far, Wyatt told Executive Committee members Tuesday.

One of the recommendations of the Sexual Abuse Task Force at the [2022 SBC annual meeting](#) was the formation of the Abuse Response Implementation Task Force. The implementation task force functioned from September 2022 until the 2024 SBC annual meeting in Indianapolis.

In its final report to messengers this past June, the Abuse Response Implementation Task Force recommended the Executive Committee find a permanent home for sexual abuse response and prevention in the SBC.

The Executive Committee took first steps toward that end Sept. 17 by adopting a recommendation from its officers to form a new department within the Executive Committee.

Seeking to be 'fully transparent'

SBC Executive Committee CFO Mike Bianchi told Baptist Press the Executive Committee is striving to be "fully transparent of how we got here, and we want to be equally transparent of where we're going."

"We want to bring all the partners, all the entirety of the SBC into that discussion of where we're going," Bianchi said.

Chairman Philip Robertson reported Executive Committee members acted during an executive session to help cover the entity's expenses and operating costs.



The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee building in Nashville, Tenn. (Baptist Press Photo)

"To meet the EC's operational and legal expenses, the Executive Committee has authorized the president to execute a loan secured by the building and place the SBC building on the market," Robertson said.

The Executive Committee discussed the potential sale of the SBC building in Nashville during its September 2023 meeting.

At the 2017 SBC annual meeting, messengers authorized the Executive Committee to "continue studying the advisability of a sale of the SBC Building, and to sell the property upon such terms and conditions, and at such a time, if any, as the Executive Committee may hereafter approve."

The building is home to the Executive Committee, the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, SBC Seminary Extension, the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives and the Southern Baptist Foundation.

Proceeds would be divided among them:

- The Executive Committee holds a 56 percent interest.
- The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission holds a 14 percent interest.
- The Council of Seminary Presidents holds a 26 percent interest. This is composed of a 10 percent interest for Seminary Extension Education and 16 percent for the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.
- The Southern Baptist Foundation holds a 4 percent interest.

The Executive Committee's next scheduled meeting is Feb. 19-20, 2025, in Nashville.