

February 18, 2025

John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts: Recent Events and Background

Recent Events

On February 7, 2025, the President announced through social media his intention to terminate an unspecified number of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Kennedy Center) Board of Trustees (Trustees), including the chairman, and appoint himself as the new chairman. Subsequently, the Kennedy Center noted that while it had received no official notification of the intended changes, it was aware that some trustees had received termination notices, and that there is “nothing in the Center’s statute that would prevent a new administration from replacing board members” although it had not happened in the past.

On February 12, the newly reconstituted Trustees reportedly voted to install the President as chair of the Trustees, terminate the Kennedy Center president, and appoint a new president responsible for the center’s day-to-day activities.

By statute, the Kennedy Center is a bureau of the Smithsonian Institution overseen by the Kennedy Center Trustees. Congress appears to have placed the Kennedy Center in the Smithsonian as an autonomous entity largely independent of the Smithsonian Board of Regents, which oversees and guides most Smithsonian activities. As part of his duties, the Secretary of the Smithsonian also serves as a Kennedy Center trustee.

The Smithsonian’s status as nongovernmental and organizationally separate and distinct from the legislative, executive, or judicial branches of the national government may have implications in efforts to change the membership of the Kennedy Center Trustees in ways that are not authorized in statute. Other questions might arise if the President asserts removal authority of a component of the Smithsonian, when he lacks similar authority over the broader enterprise. Congress might engage these concerns through oversight and annual appropriations processes.

See CRS In Focus IF12718, *Smithsonian Institution: Background, Entities, and Leadership* for further information on Smithsonian organization.

Kennedy Center Background

The Kennedy Center was originally designated by Congress as the National Center for Performing Arts in 1958. It was redesignated as a living memorial to President Kennedy in 1964. Kennedy Center facilities opened to the public in 1971.

The Trustees maintain and administer the memorial in a facility overlooking the Potomac River in Washington, DC,

where the center presents music, opera, dance, and other performing arts, and arts education. Established by Congress as a bureau of the Smithsonian Institution, the Kennedy Center operates independently, having been granted budget authority separate from the Smithsonian’s, and discretion in its decisions relating to performing arts and management of affiliated trust funds reviewable only by the courts.

The Kennedy Center is funded through appropriations and revenues primarily generated by the proceeds from various performances, and contributions. In FY2023, the latest year for which complete information is available, the Kennedy Center received approximately \$45.38 million in appropriations to maintain Kennedy Center facilities as a federal memorial. Performances, contributions, and other sources generated approximately \$266 million.

Board of Trustees

The Kennedy Center Board of Trustees is authorized by Congress to be composed of specific officials and 36 general trustees appointed by the President. Specified statutory board members include the

- Secretaries of Health and Human Services, State, and Education;
- Librarian of Congress;
- Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts;
- Mayor of the District of Columbia;
- Superintendent of Schools of the District of Columbia;
- Director of the National Park Service;
- Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution;
- Speaker and the minority leader of the House of Representatives;
- chair and ranking minority member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure;
- three additional Members of the House, appointed by the Speaker;
- majority leader and the minority leader of the Senate;
- chair and ranking minority member of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works; and

- three additional Senators appointed by the President of the Senate.

On its website, the Kennedy Center identifies specified statutory board members as ex officio, although they are not designated as such in statute. General trustees are appointed by the President for terms of six years. The statute establishing the Trustees is silent on their removal, except for expiration of their terms. Sitting general trustees have been reappointed in some cases. Officers are elected by the Trustees pursuant to bylaws adopted by the Trustees. In addition to statutorily authorized trustees, the Kennedy Center identifies the current and former first ladies as honorary chairs.

Kennedy Center Activities

The Kennedy Center is the home of the National Symphony Orchestra and the Washington National Opera. According to the Kennedy Center, it hosts 2 million visitors, 1.6 million ticket buyers, and more than 2,200 performances and exhibits in a year, including more than 400 free performances and events. The extent to which future Kennedy Center programming, revenues, or visits might change considering recent leadership changes may be of interest to Congress.

R. Eric Petersen, Specialist in American National Government

IF12911

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.