

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: Minnesota Governor Tim Walz and Attorney General Keith Ellison are testifying before a congressional oversight committee today on fraud in state programs. The hearing has drifted into debates over immigration law. There have been heated moments, plenty of tense exchanges. Politics reporter Dana Ferguson has been at the hearing in Washington, DC, for us and joins me now. Hi, Dana.

**DANA
FERGUSON:**

NINA MOINI: Set the scene for us if you would in that hearing room.

**DANA
FERGUSON:** Yeah. And you might hear a little bit of chatter here. I'm just sitting outside the hearing room as it's ongoing, but it's been tense. There have been a number of dust ups between Republican members of the committee and Walz and Ellison. There have been questions asked, and the pair weren't given much opportunity to answer before GOP lawmakers talked over them and moved on to their next points. In the room, there are some Minnesotans who came to support the governor, and a St. Paul pastor also shared testimony about the impact of an ongoing immigration operation.

Well, this was a big focus within the room. It was overshadowed by the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Representative Betty McCollum handed reporters a copy of her statement to the committee on her way out the door about 50 minutes in, saying she had to get to the defense subcommittee because there's a war going on.

NINA MOINI: What did Governor Walz have to say to the committee, Dana?

**DANA
FERGUSON:** Nina, he said on the whole Minnesota's programs are helping people, but they've been subject to fraud. He says the state has taken steps withholding potential problem payments and adding more oversight roles. He's pushing more legislative changes this session to prevent fraud. He said the committee should be looking into the immigration push dubbed Operation Metro Surge and its effects in Minnesota.

The Trump administration launched the scale up, citing an effort to address fraud. Walz says Trump is exercising, quote, political retribution at an unparalleled scale. This is from his opening remarks.

TIM WALZ: Including blocking Medicaid reimbursements to our state just last week. Under the guise of combating fraud, the federal government has flooded Minnesota with masked, untrained, and unaccountable agents who are wreaking havoc in our communities. On the streets of Minnesota, federal agents have entered US citizens' homes who have committed no crimes. They have violated the constitutional rights of our citizens. They have ignored court orders. They have shot first and ask questions later.

NINA MOINI: Dana, I wonder what kinds of questions the governor did get about fraud in Minnesota and his role.

**DANA
FERGUSON:** Yeah, it's been a split screen effect where every question from a Republican was about fraud and whether he should have done more to stop it. Democrats on the panel asked almost exclusively about the immigration action and how it was bogged down in some of these fraud cases.

That's because a group of federal prosecutors focused on fraud abruptly resigned in January. That includes Joe Thompson, the prosecutor who first used an estimate of billions of dollars in possible fraud. Republicans latched on to that number, which hasn't yet borne out in charged cases.

NINA MOINI: What did you take away from the exchanges between Walz and these committee members?

DANA FERGUSON: Yeah, it didn't take long for Walz to face sharp accusations. The first questioner, Ohio Republican Jim Jordan, used his first words to ask the governor why didn't you tell the truth. The Congressman brought up the Feeding Our Future scandal and the continued payments to providers who wound up stealing millions from the child nutrition programs. Jordan read from a judge's letter refuting a Walz assertion that there was a court order requiring the payments.

JIM JORDAN: Next sentence, that is false. So you said something that wasn't true. He further states this-- Judge Guthmann-- the court says this. Judge Guthmann never ordered the Department of Education to resume payments to Feeding Our Future in April 2021 or at any other time.

So I want to why didn't you tell the truth.

TIM WALZ: Congressman, the attorneys at the Department of Education interpreted that differently. Both of those judges are no longer on the bench.

DANA FERGUSON: Nina, not long after that, there was this exchange between Walz and the committee chair, James Comer of Kentucky, over a program to support child care for low-income families, which has also been scrutinized over fraud allegations.

JAMES COMER: Did your administration stop payments at that time?

TIM WALZ: The child care assistance program and the--

JAMES COMER: The answer is no. When fraud concerns were raised--

TIM WALZ: Would you like me to answer or not, Jerry?

JAMES COMER: Well, it's yes or no.

TIM WALZ: I'm trying-- I want you to help me--

JAMES COMER: You've already answered the question. You said you didn't ever stop payments. And that's what the problem is, and that's what the Democrats are complaining about. Oh my gosh, Trump stopped payments. Well, my God, you lost billions to fraud in Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: How about Attorney General Ellison? How is that experience going, Dana?

DANA FERGUSON: Yeah. Like Walz, Ellison talked about investigations undertaken by his office and convictions his attorneys have assisted on involving fraud. This is part of his opening statement.

KEITH ELLISON: It's important to note that under Minnesota law, my office has limited jurisdiction over criminal matters. The only kind of criminal case we can prosecute all on our own is Medicaid fraud. Any other kind of criminal case must be referred to us by county attorneys. Still we've punched above our weight where we do have criminal jurisdiction.

DANA FERGUSON: But Republicans didn't give credence to those comments. Minnesota Republican Tom Emmer, a top ranking member of Congress, doesn't sit on the committee, but he got time to ask questions although he didn't really leave time for answers as you can hear from this clip.

TOM EMMER: Did you know, sir, about the long-running FBI investigation into Feeding Our Future? Yes or no.

KEITH ELLISON: Mr. Chairman-- Mister-- Representative Emmer--

TOM EMMER: Reclaiming my time. When did you personally become aware of the FBI investigation? That's all I'm asking.

KEITH ELLISON: Representative Emmer, as you know, I have addressed this issue many times.

TOM EMMER: Reclaiming my time.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, Dana, so many different topics going on around fraud, but it wasn't just confined to fraud like you mentioned, right?

DANA FERGUSON: No, that's right. As we heard in some of that tape, Democrats focused on immigration. They brought up pardons by President Trump of people convicted of fraud related schemes.

There was a discussion of biblical verses in one part of the hearing because a pastor from St. Paul, the Reverend Mariah Tollgaard of Hamline Church, was also at the witness table. She was invited by the Democrats to talk about community effects of the immigration agent surge. This is her answering a question from Florida Democrat Max Frost.

MAX FROST: What do you say to the people who hide behind the Bible and wrap themselves in the flag to say that what is going on in our country right now with ICE, terrorizing our communities, ripping our neighbors, ripping families apart? What would you say to people like that?

MARIAH TOLLGAARD: I think, again, Matthew 25, where are we in this moment. It should be on the side of the least-- the widow, the orphan, the hungry, the homeless, and that as people of faith and moral conscience. History will tell what side we stood on, but our actions today will show true love of neighbor.

NINA MOINI: So many different topics, again, discussed it sounds like, Dana. You and a lot of other reporters have been tracking issues with fraud in Minnesota for quite some time. Did any new details emerge from this so far?

DANA FERGUSON: Not really, Nina. There is a report that committee Republicans filed at the outset. They say it was based on many hours of depositions with Minnesota officials and agencies. So we'll have to take some time to thumb through that.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And you mentioned people were maybe going in and out. There's so much going on on Capitol Hill. Is that pretty evident in what you're seeing?

DANA FERGUSON: Yes, absolutely. Lawmakers are coming in and out. You probably can hear the doors. As with Representative McCollum, some were headed to briefings about the war with Iran. Shortly after his appearance at the hearing, Congressman Emmer was at a press conference with House Speaker Mike Johnson to voice support for the war.

Johnson also announced that there will be a funding measure on the floor tomorrow to fund the Department of Homeland Security, which has been partially shut down over a standoff on immigration enforcement policy. DHS Secretary Kristi Noem is testifying in another House Committee today with Minnesota and the immigration operation a big focal point there, too.

NINA MOINI: Thanks for tracking all of this from Washington for us, Dana.

DANA You're welcome, Nina.

FERGUSON:

NINA MOINI: That's MPR News, politics reporter Dana Ferguson.