



Unpaid Yet Privileged: The Perks and Benefits Provided to the President's Spouse

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Key Takeaways

- The role of the First Lady has evolved from managing social events and internal affairs to taking on significant public influence and responsibilities.
- Although the First Spouse does not receive a government salary, there are several perks and benefits that have been provided, including travel, security, and support staff. Spending for the Office of the First Lady has increased significantly over the past two years compared to historical trends.
- After leaving the White House, First Spouses are eligible for postal franking privileges for official correspondence, an annual widow pension, and security protection.

Introduction

While the role of the First Spouse is an unpaid “office of honor,” it comes with several perks and privileges. These include residing in the White House, personal security details, and logistical support. Over the years, the position has evolved from a purely domestic role within the White House residence to one of significant public influence, accompanied by an increase in support staff and taxpayer dollars. This is especially evident with the quadrupling of the Office of First Lady’s personnel and the tripling of the salary costs in 2024 compared to just two years ago.

This paper reviews the perks and benefits afforded to the First Spouse and the growth of the Office of the First Lady since a 1994 law required annual reports on White House personnel.

The Evolution of the First Lady’s Role and Budget

Historically, the role of the First Lady was primarily focused on organizing social events and managing the White House’s internal affairs. However, as societal norms evolved, so did the responsibilities and expectations placed on First Ladies. In recent decades, First Ladies have often used their platform to champion social causes, engage in diplomatic efforts, and take on a variety of public service initiatives.

The growth of the First Lady’s role has been paralleled by [increases in the resources](#) allocated to it. Edith Roosevelt, wife of President Theodore Roosevelt, was the first to have a federally-employed social secretary. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, expanded the office by adding a personal secretary along with social and administrative secretaries. Jackie Kennedy further professionalized the office by hiring a press secretary, appointment secretaries, and speechwriters. By the time of President Jimmy Carter’s administration, Rosalynn Carter brought on a chief of staff to help support the expanded team.

On November 2, 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed [Public Law 95-570](#). This codified and clarified the authority for hiring staff for the White House Office and the Executive Residence. It also formally authorized assistance and services to the spouse of the President “in connection with assistance provided by such spouse to the President in the discharge of the President’s duties and responsibilities.” If the President has no spouse, another family member could be designated by the President to receive the assistance and services.

Current Budget and Staffing

The [Independent Counsel Reauthorization Act of 1994](#) requires the President to submit an annual report to Congress each July 1 detailing the names, titles, and salaries of each individual employed in the White House Office. NTUF has obtained electronic versions for all but five of these reports since they were first required in 1995. The table below lists the number of personnel and the combined salaries of the Office of the First Lady.

This data demonstrates the growth in the Office of the First Lady over the years since Edith Roosevelt’s single-person office. This increase reflects the evolving and expanding role of the President’s spouse behind the scenes at the White House and in public life.

From 2003 through 2024, a total of \$21,179,909 has been spent on staff salary in the Office of the First Lady, an average of \$962,723 per year. The number of personnel has varied over the years depending on the First Lady. It is also important to note that the data reflects a snapshot of employment rates and salaries at the midpoint of each year.

Table 1. Number of Personnel and Combined Salaries of the Office of The First Lady From 1995 to 2024

First Lady	Year	Number of Personnel	Combined Salaries
Jill Biden	2024	24	\$2,398,819
	2023	20	\$1,982,414
	2022	6	\$763,875
	2021	8	\$1,032,500
Melania Trump	2020	8	\$989,447
	2019	6	\$750,900
	2018	3	\$449,700
	2017	4	\$486,700
Michelle Obama	2016	12	\$986,837
	2015	10	\$887,272
	2014	10	\$891,870
	2013	9	\$750,200
	2012	12	\$1,048,200
	2011	14	\$1,062,800
	2010	15	\$1,198,870
	2009	16	\$1,240,700
Laura Bush	2008	16	\$1,266,400
	2007	12	\$897,800
	2006	9	\$594,100
	2005	8	\$435,300
	2004	5	\$353,825
	2003	12	\$711,380
	2002	N/A	N/A
	2001	7	\$433,000
Hillary Clinton	2000	10	\$747,000
	1999	11	\$723,500
	1998	N/A	N/A
	1997	N/A	N/A
	1996	N/A	N/A
	1995	N/A	N/A

First Lady	Average Number of Personnel	Average Combined Annual Salary
Jill Biden	15	\$1,544,402
Melania Trump	5	\$669,187
Michelle Obama	12	\$1,008,344
Laura Bush	10*	\$670,258*
Hillary Clinton	11*	\$735,250*

* Reflects partial data due to missing reports.

Hillary Clinton’s Office of the First Lady had an average of 11 personnel during her last two years in the White House, the only data currently available for her tenure. Excluding the missing year of data, Laura Bush had an average sized staff of 10, although the number increased to 16 during her final year. The total payroll spent by each reflects an average annual salary of around \$67,000.

Michelle Obama’s Office of the First Lady had an average staff size of 12, but the average was generally larger in her first four years compared to the last four. The total annual salary amounted to just over \$1 million per year, or \$84,000 per staff.

With an average of five per year, Melanie Trump had a smaller staff size than all the other first ladies. However, she paid a higher salary at an average of \$134,000.

Budget data for the Biden administration shows that the First Lady employed eight and six personnel during her first two years in the White House, respectively. However, since 2022, Jill Biden quadrupled the size of her staff to 24 in 2024, with a total salary ballooning from \$764,000 to \$2.4 million. This expansion has been driven by the hiring of deputies for existing positions, such as policy directors, communications directors, and special assistants, alongside the onboarding of an advance team, see Table 3, below.

Travel

Security concerns necessitate that the First Spouse travels on military aircraft. For longer trips, a [Boeing C-32](#), a military version of the 757, is often used. For fiscal year 2024, the reimbursable rate for using the C-32 is set at \$13,816 per hour.

First Ladies have also used a [C-40 Clipper](#), a military version of the Boeing 737. For fiscal year 2024, the reimbursable rate for using the C-40 Clipper is \$9,427 per hour.

Other options include the [C-37A or C-37B](#), the military versions of the Gulfstream V and Gulfstream 550. For fiscal year 2024, the reimbursement rate for using either aircraft is \$8,240 per hour.

When First Ladies use a military aircraft for unofficial trips such as campaign events, a portion of the costs of the use of the aircraft are reimbursed to the government, usually by a political party or an official campaign organization. The expenses will be reported in filings to the Federal Election Commission.

Table 3. Titles of Personnel in the Office of the First Lady: 2022 vs. 2024

<u>2022</u>	<u>2024</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisor to the First Lady • Communications Director for the First Lady • Director of Policy and Projects for the First Lady • Press Secretary for the First Lady • Special Assistant to the Chief of Staff for the First Lady • Trip Director for the First Lady 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisor to the Senior Advisor to the First Lady • Communications Coordinator for the Office of the First Lady • Communications Director for the First Lady • Deputy Associate Policy Director for the Office of the First Lady • Deputy Communications Director for the Office of the First Lady • Deputy Policy Director for the Office of the First Lady • Director of Policy and Projects for the First Lady • Executive Director of Joining Forces for the Office of the First Lady • Press Secretary for the First Lady • Senior Advisor for Joining Forces for the Office of the First Lady • Senior Advisor for Women’s Health for the Office of the First Lady • Senior Advisor on Cancer for the Office of the First Lady • Senior Advisor on Foreign Policy for the Office of the First Lady • Senior Advisor on Workforce Development and Education for the Office of the First Lady • Senior Advisor to the First Lady • Senior Policy Advisor for the Office of the First Lady • Senior Presidential Speechwriter for the First Lady • Special Assistant for Policy and Communications for the Office of the First Lady • Speechwriter for the Office of the First Lady • Staff Assistant for Scheduling and Advance for the Office of the First Lady • Trip Director for the Office of the First Lady

Fanfare

“Hail to the Chief” is a well-known musical introduction performed by the Marine Corps band since 1801 for public appearances of the President. According to a 2022 *Washington Examiner* [article](#), the Marine Corps Band developed a similar theme song for the First Lady, “Fanfare for the First Lady.” A source told the *Washington Examiner* that the band was instructed by a representative of Jill Biden, however her press secretary denied that anyone from the White House instructed the Marine Corps band to make her a special song. While the origin for the composition is unknown, it represents the newest perk for the First Spouse.

Post-White House Security

After a 1994 law limited Secret Service protection for former Presidents and their spouses to ten years, the [Former Presidents Protection Act of 2012](#) reinstated lifetime protection. According to the Congressional Research Service, [former First Spouses](#) will lose this protection if they divorce from the former president and widows can continue to receive lifetime protection unless they remarry. Protection costs for former Presidents and their spouses or widows are not publicly disclosed for security reasons.

The [Former Presidents Act](#) authorizes the General Services Administration to provide up to \$500,000 to each former First Spouse for travel and security if they are not receiving protection from the United States Secret Service.

Widow Benefits

The widow of a former President is eligible for an annual pension of \$20,000, but this is optional. For example, Betty Ford and Nancy Reagan [waived](#) this benefit. They are also entitled to [postal franking](#) privileges that allow for free postage for official correspondence. According to budget data from 2000 through 2015 published by the Congressional Research Service, the franked mail benefit was worth an annual average of [\\$7,000 for each of the surviving widows](#).

Conclusion

The perks and benefits associated with the evolving role of the First Spouse have expanded significantly. As taxpayer dollars continue to underwrite a substantial support staff, it remains essential to balance this spending with transparency and accountability.



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