

Gov. Gavin Newsom's former chief of staff arrested in FBI public corruption probe

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Federal officials arrested Dana Williamson, Gov. Gavin Newsom's former chief of staff, Wednesday in a public corruption probe that includes multiple charges of bank and wire fraud, according to a federal indictment obtained by The Sacramento Bee. Williamson, who left the Governor's Office in December 2024, is named along with Greg Campbell, Sean McCluskie and two others on a conspiracy to commit fraud related to funds in a dormant political campaign account for former US Congressman Xavier Becerra. There are 23 counts in total; the 18 bank and wire fraud charges each carry a maximum of 20 years in prison and up to \$250,000 in fines. Williamson is expected to make an initial appearance Wednesday afternoon in Sacramento federal court. Williamson did not immediately respond to a request for comment. McCluskie and Campbell could not be immediately reached for comment, and it was unclear if any of the three had yet retained an attorney. Williamson, 53, was the third chief of staff to Newsom. Before joining his staff, she operated her own consulting firm, Grace Public Affairs, and was a senior aide to numerous California elected officials, including Govs. Jerry Brown and Gray Davis. Federal officials allege that once Williamson joined the Newsom administration, she transferred control of the scheme to an unnamed co-conspirator, but remained involved the whole time. A Newsom spokesperson distanced the governor from Williamson in a statement. "Ms. Williamson no longer serves in this administration," the statement said. "While we are still learning details of the allegations, the Governor expects all public servants to uphold the highest standards of integrity. At a time when the President is openly calling for his Attorney General to investigate his political enemies, it is especially important to honor the American principle of being innocent until proven guilty in a court of law by a jury of one's peers." McCluskie is a longtime former chief of staff to Becerra, the former Biden official and California Attorney General now running for governor. Representatives for Becerra's campaign did not respond to requests for comment Wednesday. Campbell ran a lobbying and consulting firm called Campbell Strategy & Advocacy. According to a statement from the US Attorney's Office, between February 2022 and September 2024, Williamson and her fellow conspirators plotted to divert around \$225,000 in funds from Becerra's dormant state political campaign for McCluskie's personal use. The court filings also allege that Williamson conspired to create fake contracts to justify federal COVID loans made to her company. The charges also accuse Williamson of filing false tax returns, claiming more than \$1 million in business deductions for personal expenses. The expenses were for trips to luxurious Mexican resorts, designer handbags, jewelry, home furniture, and travel on private jets. The indictment also alleges that Williamson provided government information to a company involved in litigation with the state, and lied about it to the FBI. It details profane text messages allegedly sent by Williamson and a co-conspirator deriding someone who had submitted a public records request for information about the litigation. "F— her," one of the text messages says. "Double f— her."

Williamson's aggressive leadership style and political influence made her a central figure in the Capitol while she worked for Newsom, drawing praise from allies and criticism from opponents. Before deactivating her X (formerly Twitter) account, Williamson frequently criticized political opponents, often targeting lawmakers who disagreed with the administration's priorities. She stepped down from Newsom's office in December 2024, months after clashing with supporters of Proposition 36, which Newsom opposed, in emails leaked to the media. She was replaced by Nathan Barankin, a former adviser to Vice President Kamala Harris and now Newsom's top aide. In a farewell statement issued last December, Williamson said, "It's always hard to leave this work, but in two short years, we've made a lasting impact. I've had the honor of serving under three governors and when asked what I will

miss the most, my answer is always the same — the privilege of working with some of the smartest and most committed people I’ve ever known.” The indictment accuses Williamson and two co-conspirators of funneling dormant campaign funds through accounts they controlled for the benefit of McCluskie. The money was then disguised to pay McCluskie’s spouse for a “no show” job, the indictment alleges. It says that McCluskie had worked for an unnamed person referred to as “Public Official 1,” who had a dormant campaign account. Williamson, the indictment said, billed the account for \$7,500 per month for consulting services, and McCluskie would approve the payments. That public official appears to be Becerra, who was serving as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services while the conspiracy is alleged to have taken place. McCluskie and Williamson had an “ongoing relationship of trust” with the public official, who would not have otherwise approved the payments, the indictment said. The alleged scheme netted about \$225,000, the indictment said. In addition, Williamson was accused of falsely claiming personal expenditures as business expenses on her taxes, including \$15,353 for a Chanel handbag and ring, a \$10,000 payment to a relative, \$19,000 for a heating and air conditioning system for her home and \$21,175 to charter a private jet. The tax claims totaled nearly \$1 million, the indictment said.

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