

Setting the Record Straight

The Simón Bolívar Foundation's 2020 Grant to the American Venezuelan Engagement Foundation

June 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a March 12, 2026 broadcast on the “Alejandro Marcano Santelli” YouTube channel, Jorge Elías Castro Fernández claimed that the Simón Bolívar Foundation (the “Foundation”) paid \$75,000 to the family of Orlando Viera-Blanco, then the ambassador to Canada of the Juan Guaidó Interim Government of Venezuela, and that the money was used to fund the wedding of the ambassador’s daughter. This claim is false. The Foundation did not make a payment to the Viera-Blanco family, nor did it finance a wedding. The Foundation is issuing this report to set the record straight.

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Foundation awarded a \$50,000 grant to the American Venezuelan Engagement Foundation Inc. (“AVEF”), a registered United States charity, to fund a food-relief program for malnourished Venezuelans. The grant was paid to the organization, not to any individual. Months later, a routine internal audit revealed that AVEF’s president was married to the Interim Government’s ambassador to Canada, a relationship that AVEF had not disclosed during the application process. The Foundation’s assessment was that AVEF made an honest misinterpretation of the questions, not an attempt to conceal the relationship. The Foundation investigated, found that the relationship had played no part in the award and that no funds had benefited any individual in the ambassador’s orbit or otherwise been used improperly, but nevertheless terminated the grant and recovered the unspent money. The portion AVEF had already spent, a little under half of the grant, had gone entirely to delivering more than 368,000 meals to hungry families across Venezuela.

THE FOUNDATION AND THE COVID-19 SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM

The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) private charitable foundation associated with CITGO Petroleum Corporation (“CITGO”), which is indirectly owned by the Petróleos de Venezuela, the Venezuelan state-owned oil company. The Foundation operates as its own legal entity, separate from CITGO and the Venezuelan government, reports its activities and expenditures to the Internal Revenue Service, and submits to external audits.

In 2020, the Foundation directed its charitable work toward the COVID-19 pandemic. Through its COVID-19 Small Grants Program (the “Program”), the Foundation funded projects that helped Venezuelans cope with the effects of the crisis. The Program was open call: any nonprofit could apply, provided it met the Program’s published eligibility criteria, which were designed to keep the Foundation’s grant-making independent and to avoid any conflicts of interest. Among other things, an applicant could not employ, or be related to anyone employed by, CITGO, PDVSA, or their affiliates, or a government body whose decisions could affect those entities’ interests.

Applications were reviewed impartially. An independent advisory team, made up of a CITGO public-affairs representative and three external community members, evaluated each proposal against objective criteria, such as efficiency and projected impact. The highest-scoring organizations then went through a screening process that the Foundation conducted with the assistance of GuideStar, an independent nonprofit research service. After funds were disbursed, grantees were required to submit progress reports demonstrating the impact of their work. The Foundation also conducted internal audits of Program disbursements.

THE ALLEGATION

On March 12, 2026, Mr. Castro appeared on the “Alejandro Marcano Santelli” YouTube channel. During that appearance, Mr. Castro asserted that the Foundation had given \$75,000 to Mr. Viera-Blanco’s family and that the funds had been used to pay for his daughter’s wedding.

Every element of Mr. Castro’s account is false.

AVEF AND THE FEEDING SMILES INITIATIVE

AVEF is a Florida-based nonprofit, incorporated in 2017 and recognized as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. Its mission centers on combating dire social inequities in Venezuela, including malnutrition. The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect in Venezuela, leaving millions of Venezuelans unable to obtain an adequate diet. By AVEF’s account, drawing on international data, undernourishment in Venezuela had reached roughly 31 percent.

AVEF responded to this by creating a program called Feeding Smiles. Its goal was to address malnutrition among Venezuelan children, the elderly, and other adults in need by delivering at least 15,000 nutritious, fortified meals per month. Feeding Smiles proposed (1) collecting pre-packaged bags of rice, lentils, other non-perishable foods, and dehydrated vegetables and fruits, prepared in the United States and Canada; and (2) shipping them to community centers across Venezuela, where local teams turned them into meals for people in need. The Foundation awarded AVEF a \$50,000 grant to support this work over a one-year term.

AN OPEN AND IMPARTIAL SELECTION PROCESS

AVEF applied to the Foundation through the Program’s open call. Its proposal and responses to the Foundation’s eligibility questionnaire were evaluated alongside other applications by the independent advisory team and scored against the Program’s objective criteria. The Foundation screened AVEF and its officers through GuideStar, which reviewed the eligibility questionnaire and conducted additional screening checks and did not discover any red flags. On the strength of that review, the Foundation’s Operating Committee and Board approved the grant, signed a grant agreement that took effect on May 26, 2020, and disbursed the funds at the end of May 2020.

No one involved in selecting AVEF knew of any connection between AVEF and an official of the Interim Government. AVEF’s connection to Mr. Viera-Blanco was not disclosed by AVEF. The Foundation’s assessment was that AVEF made an honest misinterpretation of the questions, not an attempt to conceal the relationship

THE QUESTIONS AVEF WAS ASKED, AND THE ANSWERS THAT PROVED INACCURATE

Every organization applying for a Program grant was required to complete a detailed vendor questionnaire as part of the Foundation's due-diligence process. Among its questions were whether any key person, or a family member of any key person, was "employed or otherwise engaged in any capacity by any government"; whether any such person was "employed by or [had] official duties to any political party or political campaign"; and whether any such person was "a candidate for political office."

AVEF's president and co-founder, Gabi García, completed and certified the questionnaire on AVEF's behalf in late April 2020. She answered "No" to each of the above questions. But in fact, her husband, Orlando Viera-Blanco, was then the Juan Guaidó Interim Government's ambassador to Canada. Ms. García's answer was therefore erroneous.

HOW THE ERRONEOUS ANSWER CAME TO LIGHT

Ms. Garcia's relationship to Mr. Viera-Blanco surfaced because the Foundation's oversight processes worked as intended. Beginning in June 2020, at the Foundation's request, an internal governance and compliance audit reviewed its new COVID-19 Small Grants Program. As part of that audit, AVEF's grant was selected for detailed review.

In examining AVEF's file, the auditors researched AVEF's officers and discovered that Ms. García was married to Mr. Viera-Blanco, the Interim Government's ambassador to Canada, and that this was inconsistent with the "No" answers on AVEF's questionnaire. The auditors flagged the discrepancy and referred the matter to the Foundation's management and legal and compliance personnel for resolution.

WHAT THE FOUNDATION'S REVIEW FOUND

The Foundation conducted a careful review of the grant before taking any action. That review reached several firm conclusions.

First, the award had been untainted. Because none of the people who evaluated, scored, or approved AVEF's proposal had known of Ms. García's marriage to Mr. Viera-Blanco, the relationship played no role in the decision. The Foundation was never approached by the Venezuelan government or by the embassy in Canada to fund AVEF, and Mr. Viera-Blanco never contacted the Foundation about the grant or influenced the process in any way.

Second, no individual in Mr. Viera-Blanco's orbit benefited from the grant. The grant was paid to AVEF as an organization, not to Ms. García or Mr. Viera-Blanco personally, and the review found no evidence that either of them received any direct or indirect personal benefit from it.

Third, the funds had been used for their charitable purpose. Every dollar AVEF had spent had gone to the Feeding Smiles food program, a fact AVEF later substantiated with financial records and a detailed final report.

The problem, then, was not how the money had been used. It was that AVEF's inaccurate answers had deprived the Foundation of information it was entitled to consider under the Program's eligibility rules. When the Foundation asked Ms. García about her answers, she explained that she had not understood her husband's position to be responsive to the Program's questionnaire. She noted that he did not receive an ambassador's salary and did not live in an ambassador's residence, as well as the ambiguity of the status of the Interim Government in Canada. The Foundation's assessment was that Ms. García's incorrect answers reflected an honest misinterpretation of the questions, not an attempt to conceal the relationship.

THE BOARD'S DECISION AND THE RETURN OF FUNDS

The Foundation's Board of Directors took up the matter at a special meeting on August 19, 2020, with the benefit of the internal audit findings, a legal and compliance review, and management's account of its conversation with Ms. García. After deliberating, the Board concluded that the inaccurate questionnaire answers had prevented it from properly applying the Program's eligibility criteria and that, to protect the integrity of the Program and avoid any appearance of impropriety, the grant should not continue. The Board voted unanimously to terminate the grant agreement and recover the portion of the \$50,000 that AVEF had not already spent or committed to the program.

The Foundation notified AVEF promptly and worked with it to wind the grant down responsibly, mindful of the communities the program was feeding. AVEF cooperated fully. It submitted a financial accounting of what it had spent and returned the unspent balance to the Foundation. AVEF had spent a little under half of the grant, roughly \$22,000—all on the food program. After AVEF provided its supporting invoices and a final report, the grant was formally closed.

In short, no funds were misappropriated. The grant was used for its stated humanitarian purpose and then unwound carefully once the disclosure problem came to light, with the unspent money returned in full.

WHAT THE FUNDS ACCOMPLISHED, AND HOW IT WAS DOCUMENTED

The portion of the grant that AVEF spent before the grant was terminated had a meaningful impact. Between May and September 2020, the Feeding Smiles program shipped close to eleven tons of food from the United States and Canada into Venezuela. Working with partners who donated the food, AVEF was able to far exceed its target of 15,000 meals per month. The program served more than 368,000 meals through 64 community centers, benefiting roughly 9,300 people across the eastern, western, and central regions of Venezuela.

AVEF carefully documented its work. It provided preliminary progress reports while the grant was active, a detailed final progress report describing the program's reach and results, and a financial report supported by invoices for the food, transportation, and administrative costs it had incurred. The Foundation reviewed that documentation and verified it before accepting AVEF's accounting and closing the grant. This is the documented reality behind Mr. Castro's false allegation: a food-relief effort that delivered hundreds of thousands of meals to the most vulnerable.

STRENGTHENED SAFEGUARDS

The Foundation treated the episode as an opportunity to tighten its controls, revising its eligibility criteria to state plainly that a grant cannot be provided to an organization that has any director, officer, or employee who is employed by, or related to anyone employed by, CITGO, PDVSA or their affiliates, or the government of Venezuela.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Castro's account of a \$75,000 payment to the Viera-Blanco family for a wedding is false. The Foundation made a \$50,000 grant to a registered charity for a food-relief program, awarded it through an open and impartial process, and paid it to the organization—not any individual. When the Foundation's internal audit revealed that the grantee had failed to disclose a relevant relationship, the Foundation investigated, confirmed that there had been no improper influence and that no individual had improperly benefited, terminated the grant, recovered the unspent funds, and validated that the amount spent had been used for the appropriate grant purpose.

To learn more about the Foundation's charitable work, please visit www.simonbolivarfoundation.org.