



M U L T I S T A T E

[Former Tennessee senator's law license suspended after federal guilty plea](#) (Tennessee)

The Tennessee Supreme Court on Thursday suspended the law license of Brian Kelsey, the former Shelby County lawmaker who pleaded guilty in November to two felony charges in a campaign finance case.

Kelsey's license awaits further review from the Tennessee Board of Professional Responsibility, the state's formal disciplinary body for licensed attorneys.

The former state senator pleaded guilty to two federal corruption charges in what prosecutors described as a campaign finance conspiracy to benefit a failed bid for a U.S. congressional seat.

Kelsey did not seek reelection this year as his legislative career, once one of Tennessee's most promising among young Republicans, ended with a whimper under the cloud of his approaching federal trial. Kelsey initially called the charges a "political witch hunt," but moved to change his innocent plea earlier this fall after his co-defendant, Nashville social club owner Joshua Smith, pleaded guilty in the case.

Both men are scheduled for sentencing in federal court next year.

Kelsey's guilty plea now prevents him from holding state office, though it doesn't automatically mean Kelsey will permanently lose his law license. The Board of Professional Responsibility will hold a formal disciplinary hearing and ultimately forward their recommendations to the Supreme Court for final action.

Outside of the legislature, Kelsey has been an active constitutional lawyer, arguing high-profile cases like the contentious school voucher issue.

He was most recently a senior attorney at the conservative, Chicago-based Liberty Justice Center law firm. Following Kelsey's guilty plea, the center clarified he left the job in October.

[Bill to revamp campaign finance laws clears Assembly hurdle](#) (New Jersey)

An Assembly panel on Monday approved a new version of a bill that would revamp campaign finance laws supporters say are outdated, but critics warned the changes could shield corruption and increase the influence of wealthy contributors.

The measure (A4372), approved in an 8-1 vote with three abstentions, would [double campaign contribution limits](#) and revise the state's pay-to-play laws.

Other portions of the bill, including a requirement to report contributions from high-dollar donors within 96 hours, were left on the cutting room floor over concerns about feasibility, a major blow for good-government advocates who supported them. The bill's sponsor, Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald (D-Camden), said lawmakers need to discuss the rolling reporting provisions more.

"How we were going to manage that, how it would be constructed, was something I think we want to talk about more," Greenwald said.

While the bill would eliminate rolling reporting for donors giving \$2,000 or more total to a campaign, it would bolster a reporting requirement that comes into effect in the final days of a campaign.

Current law requires candidates to report contributions from donors who have given \$1,900 or more within 48 hours during the final 11 days of a campaign. The bill would require such contributions to be reported to the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission, which is backing the reforms, within 24 hours.

The revised bill advanced Monday would also lower the threshold at which 501(c)4 nonprofits and PACs must report contributions from \$10,000 to \$7,500 and would require such groups report all expenditures. Existing law only requires the disclosure of outside spending above \$3,000.

In 2021, qualified candidates could receive up to \$10.5 million in public funds during the general election, though that number shifts from cycle to cycle.

Assemblyman Brian Bergen (R-Morris), the only member to vote against the bill Monday, said he worries its proposed change on publicly reported donations would turn some residents away from political giving.

Current law requires campaigns to list a donor's name and address, alongside some other information, on campaign finance filings if that donor has given a total of \$300 or more to a campaign, making them more likely to face solicitations for funds or receive election mailers from other campaigns. The bill would reduce that threshold to \$200.

"They don't want to end up with additional mail they don't need or phone calls they don't need," Bergen said. "I thought \$300 was a pretty fair limit, and that's what everybody's accustomed to. To move it down to \$200 would limit those people's ability to support us."

Greenwald noted donor information was disclosed for contributions as low as \$5 under the defunct Fair and Clean Elections Law more than a decade ago.

“I think we’re all very sensitive to our donors and how they’re treated, but I think there’s this balance, though, between people being a part of the process and the transparency around it,” he said.

The bill would also lower the threshold at which firms can be barred from holding public contracts. New Jersey’s pay-to-play law bars contractors who give \$300 or more to a candidate or political party from winning no-bid contracts in that jurisdiction. The bill would lower that threshold to \$200.

It would also exempt contributions to party organizations from the pay-to-play law, something advocates warn would invite abuse given that the legislation would also bar towns and counties from enacting their own pay-to-play ordinances.

“Any local government that wanted to close a loophole wouldn’t have the opportunity to do so, and that is concerning,” said Philip Hensley, a democracy policy analyst for the League of Women Voters of New Jersey. “This bill, at least as drafted, creates a new loophole by allowing businesses covered by the existing pay-to-play laws to now give contributions through a local party committee.”

Lawmakers aren’t expected to approve the bill before the start of the new year, though Greenwald said he intends for the new rules to be in effect for legislative elections in 2023. The primaries for those races are in June.

Assemblymen Jay Webber, Tom Giblin, and Antwan McLellan were the three who abstained from voting on the bill.

[Dana Nessel: Keep Lee Chatfield records secret to avoid embarrassment](#) (Michigan)

The criminal investigation into former House Speaker Lee Chatfield also involves other high level government officials, appointees and lobbyists, a lawyer in Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel’s office has told an Ingham County judge.

Assistant Attorney General Michael Frezza made the disclosure during a Nov. 21 court hearing where he urged Ingham County Circuit Court Judge Wanda Stokes to shield records in the Chatfield case — which had already been ordered released by another judge — from public view.

Doing so, Frezza said, would protect the investigation as well as any victims and witnesses. Frezza also expressed concern about embarrassing the people named in the investigation documents.

“Without going into specific detail,” Frezza said, “this investigation involves a series of former Michigan officials, current officials, lobbyists, governmental appointees, at high levels, and other governmental employees.”

But Frezza added that “they are only allegations,” and posited that by releasing search warrant affidavits tied to the investigation, those parties “just by having a name associated with wrongful conduct, could be exposed to embarrassment.”

“So there may be people who did nothing wrong, just associates,” he said. He added that there may be people who did “something more minor wrong,” and people who did “very major things wrong.”

Frezza’s statements, contained in a newly-public court transcript, provide new details about the scope of an investigation that began with allegations of sexual assault by Chatfield’s sister-in-law, and has since expanded to include a wide-ranging probe of Chatfield’s financial conduct while in office.

The request to shield the documents came after a lower court judge on Nov. 8 ordered their release to Bridge Michigan and the Detroit Free Press, after the two news outlets appealed blanket suppressions that state lawyers had used to keep them private.

By law, Michigan search warrant affidavits become public 56 days after a search is conducted, with limited exceptions. But government investigators in the Chatfield case have routinely sought and obtained indefinite suppression of such documents through legal filings and court hearings in which news organizations were not given notice or the ability to appear to contest the documents’ suppression.

Michigan law contains no explicit provision allowing investigators to shield search warrant documents to avoid embarrassing people who are named in the documents.

In court filings urging 54-A District Court Judge Stacia Buchanan to release the documents, Bridge and the Free Press argued that while investigators often have good reason to temporarily shield search warrant information from the public — such as, to avoid tipping off a critical witness — there was no evidence those circumstances applied to the Chatfield documents.

Some of the records in question had already been released to the Detroit News, apparently by accident, while court officials refused to share them with other news outlets or the public.

Buchanan concluded that state lawyers who had obtained orders to shield the documents from public view had relied upon a statute that doesn't allow such blanket suppressions.

That prompted state lawyers to appeal to Stokes, who granted the current order staying (delaying) the records' release to the public. Bridge and the Free Press are contesting Stokes' order.

In the hearing with Frezza, Stokes said she disagreed with the lower court's conclusion that investigators relied on a statute that only allows shielding documents from the person who is a target of a search.

"The district court has read 780.654(3) too narrowly," Stokes said, according to the transcript.

Spokespeople in Nessel's office did not immediately respond Wednesday to a request for comment. Frezza did not answer a phone call.

In a round table interview with Michigan news media on Wednesday, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer responded to a question about the Chatfield case by expressing concern about broader accountability failings in state government.

“There were a lot of things that didn't work well,” Whitmer said. “And in terms of oversight accountability, and I think that there's a lot of work that this incoming legislature is keen on doing and we'll work very closely together on that. People deserve to know that their leaders are looking out for them, not themselves. That they're following the law. And if the law is not tight enough, we'll change it.”

More specifically, Whitmer said Wednesday she'd like to "take a look" at Michigan lobbying laws and "make some improvements," including the closure of what she called "loopholes that perhaps contributed to the alleged Chatfield story."

"I'm not as steeped in it as our attorney general's office," the governor said. "There's probably lots that none of us knows yet, so I think we've got to understand it, learn from it, and fix areas where we can."

Whitmer negotiated several legislative packages with Chatfield when he served as House Speaker during her first two years as governor but said she was not aware of any unethical or potentially criminal activity on his part.

"I did not hang out with him socially," she said. "(We) had meetings, and on a handful of occasions he came over to the (governor's) residence, but we didn't hang out."

Chatfield's sister-in-law, Rebekah Chatfield, told police and Bridge in December 2021 that the former House Speaker had been sexually assaulting her since she was a student of 15 or 16 years old at the Chatfield family-run Christian school where Lee Chatfield then taught.

Lee Chatfield's brother and Rebekah Chatfield's husband, Aaron Chatfield, told Bridge that his politically powerful older brother helped secure him jobs in Lansing, including a position at Grand River Strategies, a consulting firm hired to help run the House Republican Campaign Committee, where Aaron said he was essentially paid to work as Lee's unofficial driver.

Through his lawyer, Lee Chatfield has denied wrongdoing, saying he engaged in a yearslong consensual affair with his sister-in-law when the two were consenting adults.

In the year since, investigators have searched multiple properties and the personal belongings of Chatfield and his close associates, seeking information pertaining to the assault allegations as well as allegations of financial misconduct against Chatfield.

The former House speaker was a [prolific spender and fundraiser](#) who raised eyebrows in Lansing for his lavish lifestyle and frequent lobbyist-paid meals and trips.

A Detroit News [investigation](#) found that the lobbying firm Governmental Consulting Services, Inc. spent nearly six times more money on Chatfield than the two previous three speakers combined, and rented an apartment from one of the firm's clients.