

## [In a pandemic, lobbies move into the home office](#)

Ben Chouake is an emergency physician with a side gig: He leads NORPAC, a leading pro-Israel political action committee.

I check in occasionally with Chouake to see how the New Jersey-based PAC is doing, what's on its agenda. It's a right-leaning pro-Israel group, taking its cues from AIPAC and groups to that lobby's right. NORPAC can directly deliver only a legal maximum of \$10,000 per candidate, but it has outsize influence because its endorsees are a guide for donors in the mainstream pro-Israel community.

This week, when I asked about NORPAC, Chouake wanted to talk about the coronavirus pandemic. It was a pivot typical of calls I made to other lobbyists.

The urgency that routinely attaches to political messaging in the pro-Israel sector had receded and the overwhelming tone was of deference to a legislative system that is grappling with a historic crisis. Lobbyists are holding back — in part due to the fact that much of what they do involves face-to-face meeting.

“The double challenge is no one is pressing the flesh, you don't want to meet in groups,” Chouake said, adding that NORPAC had canceled 11 meet-and-greets due to the pandemic. “And the stock market went from 29,000 to 18,000, and a lot of people are out of work.”

NORPAC's salons throughout the tri-state region of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut attract some of the pro-Israel realm's most dedicated givers and allows them to schmooze with candidates, to pin them down on their views and to write checks. Recent honorees include Mikie Sherrill, the moderate New Jersey Democrat who flipped a Republican district in 2018, and Max Rose, the Jewish Staten Island Democrat who did the same, along with GOP Sens. John Cornyn of Texas and Bill Cassidy of Louisiana.

Chouake is unfailingly charming and cheery, and loves to talk about Israel, legislation and congressional races. Now the charm was laced with a grimness. I had noticed that NORPAC had canceled its annual Washington lobbying day, even though it was scheduled for May 19. Chouake was not optimistic that systems would be back to normal in two months, and his explanation stemmed more from his experience as a physician rather than as a lobbyist.

“What eventually happens is hospitals get inundated in taking care of people on respirators,” he said.

### *AIPAC and J Street chill out*

AIPAC spokesman Marshall Wittman told me that deference must be paid first to the overriding crisis of the coronavirus.

“All of our actions go forward with that in mind,” he said.

Dylan Williams, J Street’s vice president for governmental affairs, said the liberal Jewish Middle East lobby also was holding back.

“Right now our chief rule is lawmakers work to protect and provide for their constituents, and that comes first,” he said.

AIPAC did send out an action alert this week urging lawmakers to sign a letter to the Trump administration asking it to press the U.N. Security Council to reauthorize its embargo on Iran. But Wittmann pointed out that the issue is time-sensitive — the embargo lapses in October.

“We recognize our issues continue to be important as evidenced by Iranian-backed militia attacks [on U.S. targets in Iraq] this year,” Wittmann said. “At the same time, we have to seek a balance in how we approach members of Congress right now.”

A top Democratic official in the U.S. House of Representatives told me that he had noticed the broader pullback by AIPAC and other pro-Israel groups.

“This is the time of year that they usually try to finalize the items of policy conference,” the Democratic official said, referring to the annual AIPAC conference that was held this year at the beginning of March. “And not a single person has reached out to push and pull, which I appreciate. The only AIPAC person who called reached out just to see how I was doing, which I thought was really thoughtful.”

This official had seen the action alert on the Iran arms embargo, which he thought was appropriate because of the time-sensitivity, but said foreign policy simply was not on the horizon.

“We are 99 percent coronavirus right now and it is absolutely impossible to have a conversation about foreign policy when you’re literally trying to save people’s cars, houses, families, and I think these groups appreciate that,” he said.

Williams, the J Street lobbyist, said his group has pivoted to assisting congressional offices in constituent services.

“There are a number of offices that have constituents with kids overseas, on study abroad, that are working to try and get those folks home,” he said. “Sometimes offices are looking for help to connect to the right desk officer at State or at an embassy, and we’re happy to be helpful. We want to be a resource, not a nudge.”

The congressional official recalled with amazement how lobbyists not affiliated with Jewish groups continued to press for issues in the first days of the retreat by congressional staffers to their home offices two weeks ago.

“We’re setting up telework, computers, making sure staff is safe and making sure districts get what they need,” the official said. “Now is not the time to talk about data privacy.”

### *Lobbying online*

The “meet the expert” events that lobbies have in congressional meeting rooms on the Hill are geared to educate congressional staffers and exchange contact information. For AIPAC and J Street, those have moved online. AIPAC last week launched teleconference briefings with a call on the current constitutional crisis afflicting efforts in Israel to set up a government.

Chouake said he was looking into getting the meet-and-greets online.

“We have to find a way to get them back, even if it’s on Zoom,” he said.

Still, one method of influence continues unabated, Chouake said.

“We have a very tried-and-true committed group of people who realize it’s important, so they write the checks,” he said.

### **[The Race for Virus Money Is On. Lobbyists Are Standing By.](#)**

The federal government is open for coronavirus business, and the scramble to get some of it is on.

A South Carolina company has hired a lobbyist close to President Trump to try to win regulatory approval to sell a misting spray to kill coronavirus on airplanes. A Manhattan company is seeking money from the \$2 trillion stimulus package for its quick-change recyclable hospital curtains. Two prominent and well-connected Republican fund-raisers have linked up with competing businesses, both claiming to be able to acquire coveted equipment like coronavirus test kits and masks.

Across the country, companies see a chance to cash in, do some good for the country or both, making virus outbreak response one of the few thriving sectors of the economy. And because so much of the business runs through Washington, the rush has created new opportunities for those who can offer access, influence and expertise in navigating bureaucratic hurdles and securing chunks of the relief package Mr. Trump signed into law on Friday.

The boomlet has left the federal agencies responsible for regulating cleaning supplies, medical devices and medicines working overtime on requests to certify products for use in coronavirus response — and to clamp down on fraud.

The Food and Drug Administration has been processing a surge in applications for coronavirus [vaccine](#) and [treatment](#) trials. But the agency also has spent considerable time and resources fighting what it calls “[fraudulent Covid-19 products](#).”

Likewise, the Environmental Protection Agency has been [cracking down on unregistered products](#) claiming to kill coronavirus, and processing requests to list various disinfectants as approved to kill the virus on surfaces.

“I was on the phone earlier with E.P.A. today, and we’re both working 24/7,” said Hal Ambuter, who leads North American regulatory and government affairs for the British consumer-product maker Reckitt Benckiser, which makes Lysol disinfectants.

The company has been working with the E.P.A. to add more of the brand’s products to a list of disinfectants approved to kill coronavirus on surfaces. “There is a lot of work in our side, and

there is a lot of work on their side to handle the volume of requests that have come in,” he said in an interview on Friday.

The company’s outside counsel, Benjamin Dunham, lobbied Congress on provisions included in the [stimulus bill](#), which included \$1.5 million for the E.P.A. to facilitate faster regulatory processing of coronavirus-killing disinfectants.

Reckitt Benckiser has paid Mr. Dunham’s firm \$30,000 so far this year, according to a [lobbying report filed](#) this week. It indicated that a focus of his lobbying was increasing E.P.A. funding “to expedite registration actions involving disinfectant products that are effective against” coronavirus.

This month, a South Carolina-based company called NanoPure [hired Brian Ballard](#), a lobbyist who is a top fund-raiser for Mr. Trump, to help it seek approval for a misting spray disinfectant system to kill bacteria and viruses on airplanes and airports and other institutional settings.

On its website, the company says it “has obtained an exclusive, worldwide license from the United States Government to sell and distribute NanoPure’s nanotechnology platform which kills air- and surface-borne mold, bacteria, and viruses at a 99.9999% rate of effectiveness.”

The law and lobbying firm Holland & Knight set up an entire “Covid-19 Response Team,” which is expected to grow to include as many as 60 lawyers, according to someone familiar with the firm’s efforts.

In a [promotional brochure](#), it promised it could help prospective clients “survive and succeed during this uncertain period,” by securing government grants and “pandemic response funds in federal legislation” for a wide variety of uses.

The firm also says it can help laboratories navigate the Food and Drug Administration’s approval processes to bring “tests and treatments to market efficiently and effectively,” and apply for the agency’s emergency use authorization “to allow marketing of a coronavirus test.”

The firm lobbied to shape the stimulus bill on behalf of a hotel industry client, according to the person familiar with the firm’s efforts. It also helped get clients in the paper and chemical industries included on a list of critical industries allowed to continue operations during coronavirus-triggered shutdowns.

Last week, the firm registered to lobby for the battery maker Energizer Holdings on issues including winning “designation as critical industry/infrastructure on coronavirus relief packages,” according to a [filing](#).

Van D. Hipp Jr., a former deputy assistant secretary of the Army and Republican Party official, registered this month as a lobbyist for one company involved in diagnostic testing and another that provides treatments for viral infections. On [lobbying registration forms](#), he indicated he would arrange “meetings with officials regarding rapid testing for Covid-19,” and [reach out to Congress](#) on “issues related to the treatment of immune compromised patients who have documented Covid-19 infections.”

Lee C. Weingart, the founder of the lobbying firm LNE Group, said his firm is “busier now than we’ve been,” because of the stimulus.

His firm registered this week to lobby for On the Right Track Systems, Inc., a Manhattan-based manufacturer of recyclable hospital cubical curtains, to assist in obtaining federal money allocated to states and hospitals for coronavirus treatment.

Mr. Weingart said that the company has seen a sharp spike in demand for its curtains, which he said can be replaced in a fraction of the time it takes to replace more traditional curtains that surround hospital beds. “They’re shipping twice as many curtains in March as they did in January and February,” he said, adding that, in coronavirus response, “turnover of hospital rooms is critical.”

A Buffalo-area team is working to win approval from the E.P.A. for a retail version of a disinfectant.

A concentrated disinfectant made by one of the firms involved was added by the E.P.A. this month to the list of products that could be marketed to kill germs in the coronavirus family. The company linked up with Joe Mallare, who co-owns a company that makes melamine sponges, to try to sell a diluted version to individual customers. But the E.P.A. informed the team on Thursday that they would need to submit a new application, rather than an amendment to their existing registration for the concentrated blend, which is sold to institutional customers.

Mr. Mallare said his team is still committed to winning approval, and called the E.P.A. “very understanding and helpful,” including engaging in midnight email exchanges about the application process. “With this virus going, everybody in America needs this,” he said of his team’s product.

Mr. Mallare is being assisted by a pair of Republican operatives, David Ferguson and Peggy J. Ellis. They have enlisted support for the effort from members of Congress and helped Mr. Mallare's team connect with the appropriate officials in the E.P.A.'s Antimicrobials Division.

Mr. Ferguson, who specializes in conservative issue advocacy and is not a registered federal lobbyist, said "we're just trying to use our connections to do what's right for the country in a time of national crisis." He said he's doing the work on a volunteer basis, adding "this is not my core business, and now is not a time for making money."

For plenty of other Washington veterans, coronavirus is, indeed, a time for making money.

Mike Gula, a veteran Republican fund-raiser whose firm has been paid more than \$36 million since 2008 by a range of top Republican politicians and political committees, sent an email on Thursday to clients announcing that he was leaving political fund-raising to focus his "full attention" on "another business outside politics."

That business is a newly incorporated firm called Blue Flame Medical that boasts on [its website](#) that it has assembled an array of "hard-to-find medical supplies to beat the outbreak," including respirator & surgical masks, coronavirus test kits "and a wide selection" of personal protective equipment.

Neither Mr. Gula nor his partner in the business, a fellow Republican operative named John Thomas, had much experience in the medical supply field.

But Mr. Thomas said in an interview on Saturday that the connections they made through their work in politics helped them find suppliers and connect to customers, including large medical systems and law enforcement agencies around the world, including in the Middle East.

"In politics — especially if you're at a high enough level — you are one phone call away from anybody in the world," Mr. Thomas said, adding that his new company had partnered with firms to sell and distribute its products. "It's not about the financial motivations," he said of his new venture, which was [revealed Friday by Politico](#). "We're here to solve a need to help people."

Brad Wilson, another veteran Republican fund-raiser, who works for a firm that has been paid nearly \$4 million by politicians and political committees since 2008, emailed contacts on Thursday on behalf of an Arizona-based firm called CashLabs, which is selling coronavirus-related supplies.

“If you, your company, or clients are in need of large quantities of masks, rapid test kits, or long lasting sanitizing coating (up to 6 months, child and pet friendly), please see attached,” he wrote. He attached [a brochure](#) listing prices and minimum orders for products, including \$35 for a test that provides results in 10 minutes, with a minimum order of 25,000 tests. “Let me know, and I will be happy to set up a call for pricing and details,” he wrote.

In a brief phone interview on Saturday, Mr. Wilson said he had passed along the pricing sheet on behalf of a family friend who is involved in CashLabs. Mr. Wilson declined to comment when asked if he would receive a commission on sales he arranged.

Then there are industries that are appealing to the government for help repurposing existing products to help with the crisis. They include the plastics industry, which is making a plea to rethink bans on single-use plastic bags, arguing that they are more sanitary than reusable bags.

And the liquor distillers who are [converting their production to hand sanitizers](#) this week asked Congress for an exemption on the federal excise tax on liquor.

The exemption, sought by the Distilled Spirits Council, was included in the stimulus bill, but there was a wrinkle. The bill stipulated that, to qualify for the break, the hand sanitizer had to meet certain standards from the F.D.A., which has yet to approve the type of sanitizer most distilleries are producing.

Chris R. Swonger, the president of the spirits council, said most of the distilleries producing hand sanitizer want to give it away to emergency medical workers and hospitals “because the sooner we’re able to defeat Covid-19, the sooner they’ll be up making whiskey and distilled spirits again.”

### **[State ethics commission considers merits of four complaints](#)**

New Mexico's newly founded State Ethic Commission plans to meet by online video conference later this week to review the first four complaints it has received.

The complaints will be reviewed by the seven-member panel Friday in an executive session without public access to deliberations.

The commission treats complaints as confidential until there is a probable-cause finding, including determinations about jurisdiction or dismissals. That doesn't prevent people from going public with accusations or rebuttals.

The commission fields complaints regarding campaign finances, government contracting, gifts from lobbyists and more.

Voters overwhelmingly approved the creation of the commission in 2018 in the wake of a series of high-profile corruption scandals that led to jail time for former Republican Secretary of State Dianna Duran and former state Sen. Phil Griego.