



M U L T I S T A T E

Corporations can't donate to Molly Gray's campaign. But their lobbyists host fundraisers. (Vermont)

The four Democratic candidates vying to represent Vermont in the U.S. House have all taken the same pledge: no money from corporate political action committees, known as PACs.

The promise — made by the campaigns of state Senate President Pro Tempore Becca Balint, Lt. Gov. Molly Gray, state Sen. Kesha Ram Hinsdale and former congressional aide Sianay Chase Clifford — is meant to signal grassroots bonafides in a primary race confined mostly to the left lane.

But while the candidates say they won't take money from PACs representing big business, at least one is receiving significant support from some of the lobbyists who represent their interests in Washington.

“We're building a campaign for Vermonters, with Vermonters. No special interests. No big corporate PAC money. Just us, fighting for the state we love,” Gray's campaign Facebook account [posted on Jan. 31](#). “Can you chip in \$5 before midnight to help us reach our end-of-month goal?”

A little over a month later, Gray made her fundraising pitch to a different crowd at Capitol Hill events hosted by [Luke Albee](#) and [Ed Pagano](#), two former chiefs of staff to U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., who have both spent years as corporate lobbyists. Neither the campaign nor Albee and Pagano were willing to discuss the details of the events, including where, precisely, they were held, or who was invited.

“Molly feels it is important to be transparent about who is supporting her campaign. We will report every penny raised on our quarterly (Federal Election Commission) filing in full compliance with federal law. The next filing will be on April 15th,” Gray's campaign manager, Samantha Sheehan, wrote in an email. Gray was in Washington, D.C., for a lieutenant governors' conference Tuesday and was not available for an interview.

Albee and Pagano's ties to Vermont politics run deep, and Pagano sits on the University of Vermont's board of trustees. But since leaving public office, they also have taken a spin through Washington's revolving door.

Pagano's [recent client list](#) has included firearms manufacturer Sig Sauer, tobacco company PMI Global Services and corporate beermaker Anheuser-Busch, according to federal lobbying disclosures. Albee's [recent portfolio](#) has included representing several left-leaning advocacy organizations, including the massive Democratic dark money group [Sixteen Thirty Fund](#), as well as Meta, Facebook's parent organization, and manufacturers of personal protective equipment.

Other co-hosts at the Gray fundraisers included Peter Jacoby, a former longtime top AT&T lobbyist, and Marla Grossman, another former Leahy staffer-turned-lobbyist specializing in intellectual property.

Asked about the fundraisers and how they squared with Gray's pledge not to accept corporate PAC support, Sheehan said Gray's ties to the hosts were personal.

Gray has known Albee since 2006, when they both worked on the campaign to elect Peter Welch to the House seat she is now running for. And she met Pagano in 2007, according to Sheehan, when Pagano was Leahy's chief of staff and Gray was working in Welch's office in Washington.

"They are among a number of current and former Leahy and Welch staffers who have, and continue to, support Congressman Welch and Lt. Governor Gray in their respective campaigns to serve Vermont," Sheehan said.

Asked if he might lobby Gray on behalf of his clients if she were elected to Congress, Pagano wouldn't outright rule it out.

"I have no idea. I'm not — I'm supporting her as a personal friend," he said.

Albee, for his part, said he would "absolutely not" do so.

"I've been involved in many, many, many Vermont campaigns... If the implication is that the reason I'm helping her is so I can ultimately lobby her — you know, it's preposterous," he said.

Albee eagerly described his lobbying efforts for Protect Our Care, a project of the Sixteen Thirty Fund that advocates for preserving the Affordable Care Act, and his work for personal protective equipment manufacturers. "The Chinese have flooded our markets with counterfeit PPE. And

I'm trying to help the domestic PPE industry, so we're more self-sufficient as this pandemic plays out," he said.

He was more guarded about his work for Facebook. "I am an advisor for them and you know, I don't talk specifically about what I do for any of these — I let them speak," he said.

Gray is not the only candidate running for Congress this cycle eschewing corporate PAC support while accepting money and support from high-powered corporate lobbyists. Fundraising reports filed in January by Welch, who is running for Senate, revealed [thousands in donations](#) from lobbyists working in the capital's biggest firms. (Welch also regularly accepted corporate support before his Senate run, and jump-started his Senate campaign with \$2 million transferred from his former House campaign account.)

Nor is Gray the only one hosting Washington, D.C. fundraisers. Ram Hinsdale's campaign hosted one earlier in March at the home of Bruce Kieloch, a Democratic fundraising consultant.

While all of the campaigns in the Democratic primary have said they'll say no to money from big business, they said they're ready to accept support from powerful left-leaning advocacy PACs and unions. Ram Hinsdale's event was co-hosted by the Asian American and Pacific Islanders Victory Fund, which has also publicly endorsed her. Similarly, Balint has received a \$5,000 donation and endorsement from Equality PAC, a pro-LGBTQ group, although her campaign said it had not held any events in D.C.

Gray has thus far led the pack in fundraising, per reports filed with the Federal Elections Commission in January. The next filings due will cover the first three months of 2022.

Because both Ram Hinsdale and Chase Clifford announced their candidacies this year, the April filings will be their first fundraising disclosures.

[Kansas Republican lawmakers back off on dumping ethics boss leading a campaign finance probe](#) (Kansas)

Republican lawmakers on Friday pushed to oust the head of the state ethics commission amid reports that the agency issued dozens of subpoenas in an investigation into possible campaign finance violations.

But criticism of the move was followed by a quick reversal Friday afternoon.

Republican members of a joint House-and-Senate conference committee on Friday urged the adoption of a last-minute amendment to an election bill that would have effectively forced Mark Skoglund to step down as the executive director of the Kansas Governmental Ethics Commission.

The withdrawn proposal would have required the director to be a licensed attorney in good standing for three years prior to assuming the position. Skoglund's law license lapsed in 2017. He said in an interview that he chose not to renew it.

"It wasn't needed for my job and it's an expensive license to maintain," Skoglund said.

Skoglund's predecessor, Carol Williams, was not an attorney.

Republican Sen. Rob Olsen, the chair of the Senate Federal and State Affairs Committee, said mid-afternoon Friday that the proposal to reserve the ethics commission job for lawyers had been withdrawn.

Skoglund said state law prohibited him from confirming whether subpoenas had been issued in connection with an ongoing investigation. But he said he believes he's being targeted by certain lawmakers.

"This is a transparent attempt to undermine the ethics commission and to oust me as executive director," he said.

Skoglund declined to comment when asked why lawmakers would attempt to remove him.

Copies of subpoenas obtained by the [Sunflower State Journal](#) indicated that officials were looking into communications involving Republican-affiliated political action committees, including [The Right Way Kansas PAC](#) for Economic Growth and the [Lift Up Kansas PAC](#).

In 2020, the Lift Up Kansas PAC paid \$50,000 to [Battleground Connect](#), an Atlanta, Georgia, firm. The company's website says Battleground "has a proven record of electing conservatives to municipal, state and federal offices."

The Right Way PAC was formed in July 2021 by H.J. Swender, an executive with Garden City oil and gas company American Warrior, Inc.

Swender was a member of the 2016 class of Leadership Kansas, a program sponsored by the Kansas Chamber of Commerce.

Sherriene Jones-Sontag, a spokesperson for the Chamber, confirmed Friday that members of the powerful organization had received subpoenas from the commission as part of what she called a "fishing expedition."

"The subpoenas issued by the commission do not give a clear reason why they were issued," Jones-Sontag said.

The Chamber and its political action committee, Jones-Sontag said, "carefully follow the state's heavily regulated campaign finance laws."

Democratic Rep. Vic Miller, a member of the elections conference committee, called the timing of the proposed amendment suspicious given reports circulating at the Statehouse about subpoenas issued to multiple lawmakers.

"They are significant enough rumors that relate directly to the underlying concept of this legislation that I bring it up," Miller said during a Friday meeting of the conference committee. "The timing is all wrong, given what I've been hearing."

Olsen, the chair of the committee, said he had "no knowledge of any subpoenas on anybody or anything."

As to the timing of the amendment, Olson said he was surprised to learn the job requirement wasn't already in state law.

"This is a loophole that needs to be closed," he said before the new job requirement proposal was withdrawn.

Before starting at the ethics commission in 2017, Skoglund practiced at the Kansas City law firm of Sanders Warren & Russell. He has a law degree from the University of Michigan and a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Kansas.

Two motions filed this week by lawyers representing Fresh Vision OP, a group of Johnson County parents accused by the ethics commission of not following state campaign finance laws, allege Skoglund failed to correct the record when he was identified as an active attorney during a recent hearing on the matter.

Skoglund told The Kansas City Star that he didn't speak up because his status was not relevant to his role in the investigation.

Ex-Nevada lawmaker indicted in campaign funds, address case (Nevada)

A former Nevada state Assembly member has been indicted on charges that he didn't live in the district he represented, misused thousands of dollars in campaign funds and lied in statements and documents in 2018 and 2020.

Alexander Assefa, a Democrat, represented a Las Vegas district for one term and was elected to a second term before he resigned just weeks ahead of the 2021 Legislature.

He could face prison time if he is convicted of perjury, theft or filing false records. The 14-count indictment also charges Assefa with misdemeanor filing false statements of residency.

Assefa is due for arraignment April 14 in Clark County District Court. His attorney, Damian Sheets, did not immediately respond Friday to messages.

The indictment also lists Assefa's last name as Bedaso. It moves from local to state court a criminal case [filed a year ago](#) by state Attorney General Aaron Ford, alleging the same charges.

Nevada requires legislators to live in districts they represent. In his resignation letter, Assefa said he made a mistake.

In October 2020, the Las Vegas Review-Journal [reported](#) that police raided a North Las Vegas home owned by Assefa's wife and a Las Vegas condominium he listed in campaign filings.

Nashville council censures member Jonathan Hall for campaign finance violations (Nashville, TN)

Nashville's Metro Council voted to [censure](#) Council member Jonathan Hall for campaign finance-related ethics violations Tuesday — an uncommon move for the 40-member body.

Metro's Board of Ethical Conduct recommended censure for the District 1 council member on March 10 after concluding he violated Metro's ethical conduct standards by failing to file required financial disclosures in 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Metro Code requires the council's Rules Committee Chair — in this case, Council member Tanaka Vercher — to file a resolution based on the board's recommendation.

Council members approved the censure 33-0 with two abstentions after Vercher's attempts to defer and withdraw the resolution failed.

Hall, who has a pending appeal with state election finance officials for similar infractions, has said he takes full responsibility for the missing and incomplete reports. Hall said Tuesday he's hopeful a better process and more reliable disclosure system will arise from the situation.

"What we're going to do in here is what we're always supposed to do in here, which is take us and our relationships out of the conversation and just deal with the information," he told fellow council members before the vote.

The censure represents the council's on-record recognition of an ethics violation by a council member. The Board of Ethics did not recommend any further penalties.

"It is the right thing to do," At-large Council member Bob Mendes said Tuesday. "It doesn't mean we don't like Council member Hall, it doesn't mean that we enjoy this situation, but for the sanctity of the rules and what we're doing in trying to govern the city, it's the right thing to do."

At-large Council member Sharon Hurt said the situation saddened her, imploring for a way to mitigate these issues before they reach the council floor.

Metro Council will have a special-called meeting with the Davidson County Election Commission on April 14, which will cover disclosure requirements and a new way for councilmembers to submit disclosures, Vercher said.

A formal complaint filed by a Davidson County resident spurred Metro's examination of Hall's financial reports. At the same time, Hall's disclosures — or lack thereof — [came under scrutiny](#) of state ethics and campaign finance officials.

The state Registry of Election Finance voted in January to impose a [\\$360,000 penalty](#) on Hall for 36 violations identified by Assistant District Attorney General Brian Ewald in a preliminary investigation last summer. Registry board members [delayed their reconsideration](#) of the penalty in mid-March, pending updates from local authorities.

Hall [failed to file](#) multiple mandatory financial reports on time or at all during election cycles in 2018 and 2019, according to a letter sent to Hall last December by Tennessee Bureau of Ethics

and Campaign Finance Executive Director Bill Young. Reports he did file lacked required donor and vendor information and itemized expenses, including \$6,972 in "bank/cash withdrawals" and \$4,160 for "Misc. Purchases."

In March, Hall told state officials his records would soon be updated with the Davidson County Election Commission. He told The Tennessean he plans to attend the registry's next meeting with documentation for expenditures not itemized on his previously filed reports.

[Fisher lawsuit to overturn Hoboken campaign finance changes dismissed](#) (Hoboken, NJ)

A [lawsuit](#) by Hoboken Councilwoman Tiffanie Fisher to overturn the city's campaign finance law changes, which [could allow](#) labor unions to contribute more money to political campaigns in the city, has been dismissed.

Judge Joseph Turula dismissed the suit with prejudice last Friday, meaning it cannot be refiled. Since then, several of Fisher's council members demanded that she reimburse the city for the costs of defending against the suit.

Fisher sued the city in Hudson County Superior Court earlier this year over an ordinance which, by itself, would grant unions an exemption from the city's \$500 contribution limit and allow them to contribute up to \$7,200.

The councilwoman, who has opposed the ordinance, was focusing on amendments made to the ordinance before its initial second reading [in December](#) last year, where a trigger clause was added stating that the ordinance would only go into effect if another related legal matter was resolved in a certain way.

That legal matter refers to a complaint regarding Councilman Michael DeFusco's campaign finances, in which City Clerk James Farina [alleged](#) in 2019 that he had violated the city's finance laws. The clause states that the ordinance will go into effect if the court rules that the finance laws are unenforceable or unconstitutional.

Fisher had argued back then that the last minute amendment made between the first and second readings was "substantive" and failed to provide the public with any additional notice, "by way of providing an additional first reading of the amendment, which was required by law."

In response to the lawsuit, the City Council decided to reintroduce and adopt the ordinance with the trigger clause in February, but Fisher pursued her lawsuit despite the council's moves.

In court, Corporation Counsel Brian Aiola argued that the lawsuit should be dismissed because the ordinance was reintroduced and approved, therefore making Fisher's claims moot.

"Fisher's complaint challenges that passage of the ordinance based upon the failure to reintroduce the ordinance after allegedly 'substantially altering the substance of the ordinance' by amending the ordinance before second reading," he wrote. "However, in response to Fisher's complaint, the council reintroduced the ordinance and re-approved the ordinance in accordance with law."

In another brief written by Fisher's lawyer, Scott Salmon, he said that the reintroduction of the ordinance would not resolve Fisher's concerns over the transparency "and might, in fact, add to the resident confusion without further explanation."

Ruling on the lawsuit, Judge Turula said that the city had complied by fixing the ordinance and that the council's actions didn't violate the Open Public Meetings Act.

"Apparently the plaintiff makes an analogy when he implies – stating that a child who steals a cookie from a cookie jar should still be subject to punishment, even if the cookie was returned," said Turula. "While that may be true with regard to raising children, the court doesn't agree with that. The city was put on notice that the ordinance was problematic and it corrected it."

In response to the dismissal, Salmon disputed the lawsuit as being "frivolous," and said that the lawsuit "produced a very clear and positive result for the residents of the city of Hoboken in the form of increased transparency."

"All Judge [Joseph] Turula ruled was that by reintroducing the ordinance, the City addressed the issues that Councilwoman Fisher raised," he said. "That isn't the victory the city seems to think it is."

Calls for Fisher to reimburse for lawsuit

Following the lawsuit's dismissal, Hoboken spokesperson Marilyn Baer said that Corporation Counsel will be seeking reimbursement from Fisher for legal fees incurred.

Councilmembers Emily Jabbour, Jim Doyle, Joe Quintero and Phil Cohen, who all voted in favor of the campaign finance changes both times, also called on Fisher to reimburse the city from a "frivolous lawsuit."

“Councilwoman Fisher claims to be a watchdog of the taxpayer dollar, but this is yet the latest example that she is anything but,” said Cohen in a statement. “I’m disappointed by her attempt to seek political benefit from this frivolous lawsuit.”

Fisher said in response to their calls for reimbursement that Jabbour and Cohen have “short, revisionist memories.”

“I asked in a public forum if the sponsors would follow the advice of the city attorney and reintroduce the ordinance – Jabbour was silent and Cohen said he didn’t agree it was warranted,” she said. “In a later interview when asked again Jabbour said she was fine with how things were.”

“The legal process worked as it forced the city to take corrective measures to ensure transparency and the public’s voice being heard, which was acknowledged by the judge,” she continued. “I’m happy with the outcome.”

With the lawsuit out of the way, the only thing left standing on whether or not the campaign finance changes go into effect is the DeFusco [case](#). That case, which is currently in West New York’s municipal court, is scheduled for another hearing on April 28.