



M U L T I S T A T E

### [Payments to Florida lobbyist flagged in lawsuit against NRA](#)

Marion Hammer, one of Tallahassee's most well-known lobbyists, received payments from the National Rifle Association under contracts that were improperly handled, according to a [civil lawsuit](#) filed Thursday by New York Attorney General Letitia James.

James is seeking to dissolve the gun rights group, which has been a major political force nationally and in Florida, where it successfully swayed the state Legislature to pass the state's "stand your ground" law, which allows a person who feels threatened to use deadly force without trying to retreat.

The [lawsuit](#) alleges that the NRA's leadership spent funds improperly, engaged in self-dealing and made false or misleading disclosures to the attorney general and the IRS.

The complaint describes payments made to "Board Member No. 5," a person identified as the executive director of the Unified Sportsmen of Florida. State corporate records list the 81-year-old Hammer as executive director of the group. She has routinely identified herself with the organization when testifying on gun legislation at the state Capitol.

The lawsuit alleges that Wayne LaPierre, the NRA's longtime CEO, negotiated consulting contracts in 2017 and 2018 with Hammer, who sits on the NRA board, that increased her annual pay from \$150,000 to \$168,000 and then to \$220,000. The final contract, approved in April 2018, was for 10 years.

LaPierre did not receive approval from the NRA's president or vice president before the contracts were executed, according to the lawsuit.

Hammer also received grants that the NRA paid to Unified Sportsmen of Florida. LaPierre testified that Hammer receives \$400,000 a year in total from the NRA, according to the filing.

The lawsuit also faults the NRA's audit committee, claiming there were no records showing whether it looked at payments — including \$256,000 to Hammer in 2016 and \$134,000 in 2017 — to see if they violated conflict-of-interest rules.

The audit committee in 2018 retroactively approved \$3.69 million worth of payments that had been made to Hammer over the previous 19 years, according to the lawsuit. At that same meeting, the audit committee approved future payments to Unified Sportsmen of Florida.

Hammer, in an email to POLITICO, did not respond directly to the allegations, but sent a copy of the NRA's statement.

“This was a baseless, premeditated attack on our organization and the Second Amendment freedoms it fights to defend,” NRA President Carolyn Meadows said in the written statement. “You could have set your watch by it: the investigation was going to reach its crescendo as we move into the 2020 election cycle. It's a transparent attempt to score political points and attack the leading voice in opposition to the leftist agenda.”

Payments to Hammer have been revealed previously amid coverage of the NRA's financial woes and criticism of its spending. The information prompted State Sen. Perry Thurston (D-Fort Lauderdale), to file a Florida ethics commission complaint against Hammer in June 2019 that she failed to disclose the payments as required by state law.

The ethics commission late last month concluded [there was “no probable cause”](#) for a violation because Hammer filed compensation reports after the complaint was brought and that the “public interest would not be served” by proceeding further.

Hammer has long been a forceful presence in Tallahassee, routinely clashing with legislators who oppose her agenda.

The NRA's leverage in Florida comes not through direct campaign contributions to candidates, but in its ability to motivate supporters to vote for or against candidates based on their support of the group's gun-rights agenda.

The NRA and Hammer have successfully pushed gun rights bills opposed by business organizations, law enforcement, doctors, and other politically powerful constituencies.

The one notable setback for the group occurred in 2018 after the Parkland shooting that killed 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas.

Gov. Rick Scott that year signed into law a far-reaching school security measure that raised the minimum age to purchase a rifle from 18 to 21 and included a red flag measure that allows law enforcement to petition judges to take guns from a person who is mentally ill or poses a threat.

### [Becchi continues lobbying while running for Congress](#)

Republican congressional candidate Rosemary Becchi is continuing to work as a lobbyist during her attempt to oust first-term Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-Montclair).

Lobbying disclosures filed with the Clerk of the House of Representatives and the U.S. Secretary of State in the first and second quarters of 2020 list Becchi and two other employees at Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck as lobbyists on behalf of Western Union.

“They are a client of my firm.” Becchi said. “They’ve been with my firm for a very long time, so it’s not something new.”

It’s not clear that lobbying for Western Union presents any vulnerability for Becchi, despite the firm’s past problems.

In 2017 — before Becchi joined Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck — the financial services company paid \$586 million as part of a settlement with the U.S. Justice Department over its failure to combat money laundering carried out using its services and for aiding and abetting wire fraud.

Western Union’s platform is also used to abet a variety of scams, though the firm has some policies and guidelines in place to block such swindlers.

Last year, Western Union [announced a new policy](#) to prevent their company from being used to process financial transactions tied to human trafficking and modern slavery. That came after the company settled a probe by the New York Department of Financial Services over allegations that they flouted suspicious transactions to Western Union locations in China that were linked to human trafficking.

The lobbying report filed by Becchi’s firm lists financial fraud, human trafficking, terrorist financing and anti-money laundering issues as their specific lobbying issue

There’s no indication that those failures disproportionately impacted New Jersey or the 11th district, a fact that Micah Rasmussen, director of Rider University’s Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics, said would likely blunt political attacks over a given lobbying client.

“Unless there’s a specific conflict between the 11th District’s interests and Becchi’s representation of her clients, which seems to be something she is likely to have been able to avoid with Western Union, she should be fine on the merits,” Rasmussen said. “Voters do not seem to focus on the revolving door between lobbyists and who they lobby in Congress.”

Moreover, there’s nothing that suggests her lobbying work included anything improper.

“I represent clients. I represent them on different matters, whether it’s keeping them informed or helping them with tax matters,” she said. “I am a tax lawyer, and when you make outreach to the government, according to the rules, you need to identify those contacts, but that doesn’t mean that you’re doing something nefarious.”

Becchi served as tax counsel to the U.S. Senate Finance Committee more than two decades ago and runs Jersey First, a non-profit advocating for lower taxes and spending in the Garden State.

The lobbying disclosures list international remittances, money transfers, data protection, and anti-money laundering, financial fraud, human trafficking, terrorist financing, issues related to Committee on Foreign Investments in the United States reform, remittance taxes, Base Erosion and Anti-Abuse Tax provisions and the Bank Secrecy Act as the specific lobbying issues taken on behalf of Western Union.

In a 2008 investors’ meeting, Western Union said changes to laws meant to prevent money laundering and terrorist financing could impact the firm’s performance.

Specific clients aside, it’s possible that Becchi’s lobbyist job could cause her some political headaches.

“Where she could run into an issue is that the profession is not highly regarded by the public,” Rasmussen said. “So, you could imagine the Sherrill campaign pejoratively referring to her as ‘Lobbyist Rosemary Becchi.’”

But the Republican candidate wasn’t concerned about that possibility.

“No, because I advocate for lower taxes,” she said when asked whether she worried about attacks over her professional career from Sherrill’s campaign. “I have, for my entire career, been a tax policy expert and an advocate for my clients.”

## [Ethics complaint alleges group failed to disclose donors, and suggests connection to prominent lobbyist](#)

Over the course of May and early June this year, a new group called the “Council for a Competitive New Mexico” (CCNM) spent over \$130,000 on a media campaign supporting a group of incumbent state senators, most of whom would go on to lose as part of a progressive wave in June’s Democratic primary.

The media campaign included several negative mailers and automated phone-calls against candidates opposing the incumbents while the public was left in the dark about who organized the group and who funded the media campaign.

Now, an [ethics complaint](#) filed this week with the Secretary of State’s office alleges that CCNM broke New Mexico’s election code by not disclosing its donors.

Neri Holquin, campaign manager for two of the candidates who won during the June primary, Siah Correa Hemphill and Pam Cordova, writes that the group may have violated the New Mexico Elections Code by not reporting who paid for the negative advertising and phone calls against those candidates as well as others.

“It was a deliberate attempt to make it as difficult as possible for voters to know who’s behind these hits on our candidates,” said Holquin in an interview. “They knew the rules enough to file as an independent expenditure (IE) and to list their expenditures, and so why not list contributors?”

“Voters need to know that, and we have no way of knowing that right now,” said Holquin.

At the core of Holquin’s complaint is a new state law that triggers certain groups to disclose publicly and quickly who the donors are that paid for their electioneering activities if the costs are larger than a state-prescribed threshold.

Holquin said she believes CCNM was created by a group of people, including [prominent New Mexico lobbyist](#) Vanessa Alarid—whom she mentioned by name in the complaint—that have used similar tactics in recent years to influence elections at the local and state level without disclosing publicly who is funding the activities in a timely fashion.

Chevonne Alarid, the president of the nonprofit group, however, said disclosure isn’t necessary until it files its annual report to the Internal Revenue Service. In addition, she and Vanessa

Alarid both denied Vanessa's involvement. An unnamed representative of the Council for a Competitive New Mexico said in an email the group was in compliance with state law.

The disagreement offers a glimpse into an ongoing debate over how to ensure the public knows who is behind negative political messaging at a time when vast amounts of political spending is going undisclosed across the country.

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### *Lack of disclosure*

CCNM's media campaign during the primary included a mixture of negative ads targeting challengers and positive ads supporting the incumbents they opposed. A search of the Secretary of State's [independent expenditure](#) portal shows that while the group did report its expenditures, it didn't disclose the donors behind the effort, leaving the public in the dark about the interests of those behind the media campaign.

The group filed registration documents on March 11 with the Secretary of State listing three individuals associated with the organization: Chevonne Alarid, Adam Silverman, and Kelli Monnheim. The group hired Lincoln Strategy Group, an Arizona-based campaign firm aligned with the Republican Party. Nathan Sproul, founder of the group, [previously served](#) as the Executive Director of the Arizona Republican Party.

But otherwise, there is little information about the group on its website or elsewhere, about who is responsible for or funding its electioneering activities.

"We must actively explore continued economic diversification, drive increased job growth and demand reforms to our tax structure," reads the website, alongside references to New Mexico's oil and gas sector and "key policy leaders" who have "wisely fought for fiscal discipline."

Sen. John Arthur Smith, D-Deming, the chair of the Senate Finance Committee and generally regarded as a fiscal conservative, was [defeated](#) by progressive challenger Neomi Martinez-Parra in June.

The Council for a Competitive New Mexico campaigned in favor of Smith and Democratic incumbents Richard C. Martinez, Gabriel Ramos, Joseph Cervantes, and Clemente Sanchez.

Simultaneously, the group spent money, according to its reports, on negative attacks against those hoping to unseat Smith, Martinez, Ramos and Sanchez — Martinez-Parra, Leo Jaramillo, Siah Correa Hemphill and Pam Cordova, respectively. The group also ran negative automatic phone calls to voters, or “robo-calls”, with [one call](#) claiming that “outside groups dedicated to tearing down other Democrats,” were supporting Correa Hemphill against her opponent, Sen. Gabriel Ramos.

The group flooded mailboxes with mailers. For instance, in May, CCNM sent negative mailers to voters comparing Martinez-Parra to President Donald Trump.

Other mailers were more positive, casting incumbent Democratic state senators as advocates for local businesses and families.

All told, the group spent roughly \$134,000 on its campaign.

Asked numerous times via phone and email, representatives of the Council for a Competitive New Mexico declined to disclose who had funded the campaign.

“As a newly formed 501c(4), we will follow all applicable laws, public disclosure requirements and filing timelines, as outlined by the Internal Revenue Service and the Secretary of State, as applicable,” wrote a representative of the organization in an unsigned email.

Reached by phone, Chevonne Alarid, who is registered as the President for the organization, said she didn’t have much information about the group.

“I am titled the President, but I likely don’t have the information that you’re requesting,” she said on Friday. She later referred New Mexico In Depth to Adam Silverman, secretary of the group, for further information.

Silverman, who is the Vice President of the Albuquerque-area real estate developer [Geltmore, LLC](#), declined to talk on the phone for this story, instead redirecting inquiries to an email account set up by the organization.

“The Council for a Competitive New Mexico has complied with the requirements of NMAC 1.10.13.11(C) in its filings,” the group subsequently stated in an unsigned email from that account.

Chevonne Alarid said the group would file an annual report required of nonprofits. “It’s an allegation that would likely have no basis,” she said of the ethics complaint.

While Alarid was referring to federal IRS rules governing disclosure by 501(c)4 organizations, the ethics complaint alleges the group violated [state election laws](#). Those laws require groups not registered with the state as political action committees that spend over a certain amount of money to influence elections to disclose their expenditures and donors within days of the activity.

Citing the state laws, the ethics complaint emphasizes that the nonprofit group's spending falls under the state's definition of such independent expenditures, and that because the spending exceeded \$3,000, donor disclosure is required.

"Over \$100,000 got spent on these elections, very close to the election, and in ways that are not easy for voters or campaigns to know who was behind them," said Holguin.

Potential penalties named by the complaint include a civil penalty of up to \$20,000– \$1,000 per violation– as well as a misdemeanor if it can be shown that the group "knowingly and willfully" violated New Mexico's election code.

"The Secretary of State takes allegations such as these very seriously and all complaints received by our Office go through an internal process to determine if a violation has occurred," wrote spokesman Alex Curtas in an email. "We will review the allegations, pull any internal documentation or reports we may have and do a thorough analysis."

Curtas said that if the complaint required further investigation, the Secretary of State will make a referral to the State Ethics Commission.

### *Special Interests*

In her ethics complaint, Holguin wrote that she believed Vanessa Alarid is involved with CCNM. In a text message, Holguin pointed to close connections Alarid has with those running the CCNM group as well as similar groups that ran negative media campaigns in two other recent elections.

"Vanessa Alarid is a lobbyist who goes to great lengths to protect the interests of her corporate clients, namely the real estate conglomerate Western Albuquerque Land Holdings, the owners of the controversial Santolina development," Holguin said in the text message. "It seems she is often separated by one degree to PACs or IEs (independent expenditure) that go aggressively after candidates that oppose Santolina's wishes."

A prominent New Mexico lobbyist, Vanessa Alarid has long advocated for development interests in Albuquerque. Currently she is registered with the state as a lobbyist for both Garrett and Winrock Partners, LLC. She denied her involvement in CCNM in a text message, and declined to comment further.

Holguin referenced the June primary and elections in 2016 and 2017, in which new groups with generic, innocuous names abruptly appeared near the end of the election period and ran large negative media campaigns, and for a period of time the public was left in the dark about the interests behind the ads.

As New Mexico in Depth [reported in 2016](#), a political action committee called “New Mexicans for New Mexico” spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on billboards, canvassing, mailers and robocalls to boost then-Bernalillo County Commission candidates Steven Michael Quezada and Robert Chavez while criticizing Adrian Pedroza.

Most of that money came from Western Albuquerque Land Holdings and its asset manager, Jeffrey Garrett, but the public didn’t know that until final disclosure reports were filed a month after the election. A [lobbying report she filed](#) more than three months after the election clarified Vanessa Alarid donated the bulk of the money to New Mexicans for New Mexico on behalf of Garrett Development Corporation.

Pedroza, an opponent of the controversial Santolina development, was ultimately defeated by Quezada.

The group’s treasurer, Donna Madrid-Taylor, told New Mexico In Depth in 2016 that the group had “accomplished what we were setting out to do” and was shuttered.

In 2017, a group called Make Albuquerque Safe began running negative TV ads and prominent billboards against Tim Keller, then a candidate for Albuquerque mayor. New Mexico in Depth [reported in 2017](#) that Garrett Development Corporation contributed half of the \$60,000 spent by the group. At that time, Vanessa Alarid was registered with both the City of Albuquerque and the state of New Mexico as a lobbyist for Garrett.

The group ran the ads about a week before campaign disclosure statements were due, and over the course of that week did not provide any information about who was behind the group, leaving the public in the dark initially.

Holguin has found herself on the opposite side of those efforts. A longtime Democratic campaign manager, she headed up an independent group called ABQ Forward Together that supported Tim Keller in the 2017 Albuquerque mayoral election. In 2016, Holguin was the

campaign manager for Pedroza, Quezada's primary opponent for a seat on the county commission.

Beyond her role as a lobbyist for Garrett, and in the case of the 2016 election, donating money to a committee on his behalf, Vanessa Alarid had other connections to the groups.

Madrid-Taylor, listed as the treasurer for both [Make Albuquerque Safe](#) and [New Mexicans for New Mexico](#), worked at the time as a paralegal in the law offices of Jason Alarid, Vanessa Alarid's first cousin (In a brief phone call Wednesday, Madrid-Taylor emphasized that she is no longer involved with the groups and now works solely as a realtor).

Alarid has similar family connections to the Council for a Competitive New Mexico.

The ethics complaint filed this week states that Vanessa Alarid is Chevonne Alarid's sister-in-law.

In a text message, Vanessa Alarid clarified her relationship with Chevonne and denied any involvement in CCNM.

"She married my cousin and I know absolutely nothing about the CCNM. Neverheard [sic] about it," she wrote. That cousin is Jason Alarid, who shares a downtown Albuquerque office space with his wife Chevonne's own consulting firm, CLA Consulting.

Jason Alarid did not respond to a request for comment for this story. Chevonne denied Vanessa's involvement in the group, as well.

Holguin said she hopes an investigation by the Secretary of State will shed light on who funded the political advertising. As for Alarid's denial, she seemed skeptical. "The treasurers or listed agents for several PACs have been relatives or friends of relatives of Alarid's," she said. "Is it a coincidence? Maybe. But probably not."

### **[The pandemic has changed Louisiana lobbying, too](#)**

This week marks five months since the World Health Organization designated COVID-19 as a pandemic, a watershed moment that deeply transformed how elected officials do their jobs and how the influence sector of our political economy seeks to shape that process.

Business hasn't been exactly feast or famine for Louisiana's lobbyists, government relations professionals and association directors, but communication challenges, belt-tightening clients and demand for Washington access are boosting anxiety levels across the board.

Optimists predicted a "lobbying bonanza" earlier this spring, particularly for services related to state and federal coronavirus funding. But the past few months have instead served as a reminder that the lobbying corps as an industry isn't totally recession-proof.

The individuals and outfits representing troubled corners, like hospitality and restaurants for example, have been forced to adjust accordingly. Tales of reduced retainers and deferred invoices are also commonplace among government-relations professionals inside the state.

While the vast majority of practitioners who work in Baton Rouge politics are either surviving or thriving, there remains an unmistakable sense of unease about what the coming months will have in store for both the economy and policymaking.

For now, federal spending by clients and associations are on the rise, with second quarter increases posted recently by the likes of Cornerstone Government Affairs, the Picard Group and other Louisiana notables with Beltway offices, according to calculations by the Center for Responsive Politics and data from the U.S. Senate Office of Public Records.

"One of our assets has been our ability to rely heavily on our DC office and federal team," said Tyron Picard, founder and principal of the Picard Group. "Much of what we will be talking about in the upcoming October special session will be linked to what we see coming out of this next round of stimulus funding in Congress."

Back in Baton Rouge, the challenges of lobbying during a pandemic can be seen in the monthly legislative expense reports filed with the state ethics administration. Good government champions who are critical of the profession may see this as good news, but the teachers, physicians and others who hire lobbyists to represent them and distribute information on their behalf in Louisiana probably do not.

The five highest monthly reports filed by lobbyists (mostly connected to associations) last calendar year, from January to June, averaged out to about \$12,700. This year's top tier spenders averaged just \$7,800 for the five highest reports filed during the same period in 2020.

That said, even standard meetings and basic lines of communication have undergone great changes this year, said Jim Harris, the president of Harris, DeVille & Associates who works with

associations of CPAs, realtors and others. "I spend a great deal of my time texting, emailing and talking on the phone," said Harris. "I've been Zoomed to death."

Lobbyists can build a strong book of business with institutional knowledge of the appropriations, capital outlay and Bond Commission processes. But the emergence of new state and federal pots of money connected to coronavirus relief introduced a learning curve, said Rodney Braxton, a partner with Southern Strategy Group.

"You couldn't rely on your past knowledge of how things normally worked, because each one of those new pots of money had their own rules," said Braxton. "You have to do your homework and dig deep on how those revenue sources are structured in order to advise how folks can best get involved. Wasting time is not a luxury right now, and there's a real uptick in people who want to be more involved in all of this and find out what's going on. Our client base has been pretty astute. They know this isn't the time to disengage."

Government relations professionals with local government practices are in hot seats as well, especially in regard to relief funding.

"We're watching what they're doing in DC," said Eric M. Sunstrom, president of the Chesapeake Group, who works with Louisiana's mayors. "We're asking through national associations for direct funding. We're working more with newspapers and with public outreach and education. The competition is intense."

As everyone who works in some form of government here attempts to adapt, it looks like another special session of the Legislature is just around the corner. October seems to be the start date, but details are scant at best. It's a fitting next chapter to this story for political professionals like elected officials, reporters and lobbyists, who appear to be struggling at times — just like everyone else.