



July 20, 2008

Son-in-law capitalizes on ties to Blackburn

Some of lobbyist's clients are in congresswoman's district

By *BILL THEOBALD*

Tennessean Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Rep. Marsha Blackburn's son-in-law and companies he works for have been paid about \$1 million to lobby the federal government since 2004, according to a review of federal lobbying records.

Among the companies who have paid Paul Ketchel III to represent them are several that are located in the Brentwood Republican's district and whose business falls under the authority of the House committee on which Blackburn serves.

Ketchel and Blackburn's office say they avoid any lobbying contacts between the two, but good government advocates argue that having family members of congressmen working as lobbyists creates an appearance of a conflict of interest.

More than 50 members of Congress have relatives who are registered lobbyists, said Craig Holman, campaign finance lobbyist for Public Citizen, a nonprofit consumer advocacy group.

"It's clear that the appearance and perception of potential corruption shines through," Holman said of Blackburn's situation. "One of the best ways to influence (a member of Congress) is to get into a relationship with family members."

Ketchel, 34, said in written responses to e-mailed questions that he takes "the reputation of (his) family very seriously and (has) taken great care to never put (himself or his family) in any situation that could be considered a conflict of interest."

Steve Brophy, Blackburn's chief of staff, wrote in a statement released by her office that "Congressman Blackburn has long been concerned with the issue of congressional favors for preferred constituents or supporters, to say nothing of family members."

"This office has maintained a clear barrier between the Congressman and Paul Ketchel's work as a lobbyist," he said.

Primary foe is critical

Ketchel, who earned a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Tennessee, worked for former Tennessee Sen. Bill Frist from 1998-2001 as technology systems administrator. There he met Blackburn's daughter, Mary Morgan. He then worked in government relations for a pharmaceutical company before striking out on his own as a lobbyist. He lobbied under the name Ketchel & Associates before going to work for the firm now known as American Capitol Group.

"I don't feel that I should have to give up my career simply because my wife's mother was elected to public office at a later time," Ketchel said.

Blackburn was first elected in 2002 and began serving in 2003. The first lobbying reports mentioning Ketchel appear in May 2003.

According to lobbying disclosure reports, Ketchel received \$503,000 in fees on his own, while American Capitol Group and predecessor firms took in more than \$460,000 in fees from clients for which Ketchel is listed as one of several lobbyists.

Blackburn's Republican primary opponent, Tom Leatherwood of Arlington, Tenn., has criticized Blackburn for paying her daughter, Ketchel and companies they operate more than \$325,000 to help with her campaigns. Mary Ketchel is the sole owner of MK Fundraising and Events, the firm that continues to do fundraising for the Blackburn campaign. Leatherwood said Ketchel's vow to not contact his mother-in-law's office is meaningless. "He doesn't have to visit her. She knows who he works for and she knows what the interests of his clients are."

Client got contracts

Three of the nine clients Ketchel has or still represents are located in Blackburn's district and another is the parent company for one of those firms. A fifth firm is in Knoxville.

His largest client, Dialogic Communications Corp. of Franklin, paid Ketchel \$326,000 from 2004-07 to lobby the House and Senate and federal agencies to buy the company's emergency communications systems and for other purposes.

Dialogic's business and that of other current and former Ketchel clients fall under the oversight of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, on which Blackburn serves. The committee deals with telecommunication and health issues.

The company received about \$1.8 million in federal contracts from 2004 through the first half of 2007, according to FedSpending.org, a Web site run by OMB Watch, a government-spending watchdog. Special provisions designating \$4 million for the purchase of The Communicator, the company's flagship automated emergency notification system, were included in appropriations bills in 2005 and 2006.

Ketchel and Lorin Bristow, vice president of marketing for PlantCML, the parent company of Dialogic, said the special funding measures were obtained by former Sens. Fred Thompson and Bill Frist and by Sen. Lamar Alexander.

"We don't believe there is a conflict of interest," Bristow said of the company's hiring of Ketchel. He represents the company to every member of Congress, Bristow said, "not just one." Blackburn's son, Chad, is employed by PlantCML, selling systems on the West Coast, Bristow said.

Holman, with Public Citizen, said Congress did some tightening of the rules on lobbying by family members last fall. The spouse of a senator cannot lobby senators or their staff members. Further, immediate family members of a senator (sons-in-law are not covered) cannot lobby Senate staff members but can lobby senators. In the House, members cannot be lobbied by their spouses, but those spouses are free to lobby other members.

Holman said that after the November elections he and other reform groups plan to sit down with congressional leaders to discuss further reforms.