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Hired Guns for the Public Good

By James Copple

[Written by Jim Gogek]

As we were watching a story on the evening news about the extravagance and excesses of lobbyists, my son asked me, "Aren't you a lobbyist?" Yes, I said. "You must not be very good at it," he said.

By some modern standards, maybe not. I don't own an airplane. I've never played golf at St. Andrews. The most I ever paid for a suit was \$450, and I got married in it. I don't have an office on K Street, although sometimes I hold meetings at a Starbucks on K Street. I don't buy lavish dinners for members of Congress on behalf of my clients. In fact, I have nothing of value to offer a member of Congress except an occasional \$15 plaque and an invaluable cause.

What I do as a lobbyist is petition Congress on behalf of nonprofit institutions to protect lives and health, particularly of young people, through the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse, tobacco use and other public health threats. In pursuit of my cause, I will cajole, wheedle, plead, beg and even reason with members of Congress and their staffs for earmarks or any other kind of funding. If lobbyists like me are blocked by current reform efforts, then those we try to help will suffer.

Some say earmarks are the problem, because they circumvent the traditional appropriations process, which is tied to specific authorizations. Funding, they say, should be appropriated strictly by need, merit and the best interests of society. Indeed -- and if it were, I wouldn't need earmarks and my clients wouldn't need me. But that's not been my experience, and I've been around federal, state and local governments for three decades. Sometimes government funding is based on need and merit; often it's not.

The criticism of earmarks as back-door dollars for pet projects fails to recognize the changing role of government in public services. Since the Reagan administration, the downsizing of government has meant that a lot of prevention services, human services, health services and many other services are outsourced. Earmarks have grown in direct correlation to the downsizing of government. Today most program innovation and content expertise is found outside of government.

Outside experts now petition government for support. Many work for private companies that reap billions from the federal government through contracts, earmarks and any other means that

high-priced lobbyists can find. But much of this outside expertise resides at nonprofits working to improve the health and safety of communities. These organizations struggle to survive, constantly seeking ways to guarantee funding in order to provide continuity of service. These are the people I work for, and if I can get them earmarks to provide consistent, successful programs that are proven to benefit public health and well-being, I'll sleep well at night.

There are many cause-based lobbyists like me, standing with cell phones pressed to our ears on Washington street corners, working to catch a handful of budgetary decimal dust for nonprofit programs that alleviate human suffering and troubles such as underage drinking, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, homelessness, dropping out of school and fraud against the elderly. Most of us believe that the institution of lobbying needs reform, particularly the practices of gift-giving and campaign donations. Instead of getting rid of earmarks, though, Congress should require that earmarks have clear planning goals, cost-benefit analyses, evaluations, annual reports to Congress, time limits and a solid rationale for being connected to existing authorizations. I could guarantee that for every dollar I request.

There's enormous pressure right now in Washington to rein in lobbyists. Unfortunately, that may happen at the peril of serious reform and could jeopardize valuable programs and services in the process. Eliminating earmarks and requiring all new funding to be tied to departmental authorizations would only expand the government and shrink the resources available to nonprofits that have taken over the mission of building a healthy and safe civil society. Government cannot replicate what these organizations achieve.

Yes, get rid of the skybox-and-junket lobbying, but do it without stifling the work of lobbyists for the public good. I'm not Jack Abramoff and don't deserve his disrepute. My clients don't try to buy members of Congress or enrich themselves, and they don't deserve reprisals against earmarks.

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