

Campaign cash ends up in Labrador's pocket

Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune

Anytime a politician approaches an ethical border, the first thing out of his mouth is: "It's legal."

And the next thing is: "Everybody else does it."

So it goes with freshman Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, who waited all of five months in office before putting his wife Becca on the payroll.

As the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell reported, Labrador hired his wife as his campaign accountant. Hired in May, she's paid \$2,050 a month and is the campaign's sole employee.

Nepotism laws apply only to federal offices. Becca Labrador can't draw a salary from her husband's congressional staff - where he earns \$174,000.

And Labrador can't spend campaign contributions on himself. Even after he retires from office, the law prohibits him converting whatever cash remains in that account to personal use.

But hiring his wife for the campaign accomplishes the same result. In the current cycle, Labrador has raised about \$270,000, much of it from the National Rifle Association, the American Bankers Association, California Dairies Inc., and Koch Industries.

So far, he has spent \$157,737 - and \$33,725, or 22 cents of every dollar, has found its way into the Labrador family budget through the salary paid to Becca Labrador. Even that might have been illegal had a 2007 House reform - proposed after Rep. John Doolittle, R-Calif., got into trouble paying his wife a 15 percent commission on contributions to his leadership PAC - not been bottled up in the Senate.

For Idaho, this is not unique. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, paid his wife Susan \$78,514 to perform campaign work between 2000 and 2006. Susan Crapo now works only for Crapo's PAC and was paid \$4,677 from Jan. 1 to July 31.

Former Congressman Bill Sali, R-Idaho, also hired his daughter-in-law Jessica Sali for his campaign.

But the watchdog group Public Citizen says you won't find more than 20 of the 535 representatives and senators employing spouses on campaigns or PACs. Most members don't like the impression this practice creates.

Labrador says he's just being fiscally prudent. His wife works 20 hours a week keeping the campaign books.

"We are the most frugal campaign in the state," Labrador says. "We work hard and make sure that the people who contribute money to our campaign, their money's used correctly and adequately."

Then why does it cost Labrador more money to have his wife prepare the books than it does for 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, to hire an outside accountant for his campaign? Since Jan. 1, Simpson's campaign paid \$16,443 to a Blackfoot accounting firm.

And if it's so frugal to hire his own wife as an accountant, why does the Labrador campaign then secure the services of an election compliance service to check over Becca Labrador's work and make certain all Federal Election Commission rules are followed?

Assuring compliance with FEC regs is the duty of a campaign accountant. Only at the highly sophisticated presidential campaign level do you see election compliance services, says Public Citizen. Not only would that extra layer of review add expense, but it would suggest the campaign doesn't have the highest confidence in its accountant.

Labrador is smart and may have the best instincts of any politician on the Idaho scene today. But Idaho has seen several of its talented officials get tripped up by sloppy finances. Labrador is making a mistake if he thinks he's immune. - M.T.