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**FSI Exclusive:
NPS Big Contributor to Politicians
- \$189,000 Donated Over 10 Years
- FDs Fume that Regulators Were Too Slow**

The *Insider* has learned that various companies, employees and family members tied to NPS, now in receivership and under investigation in 11 states, shelled out more than \$189,000 since 1998 to state politicians and regulators in Missouri, Texas, California and Illinois.

In fact, NPS ranked 10th among the funeral industry’s top 10 campaign contributors from 1999 to 2006. That put the company just behind the Pennsylvania Funeral Directors Association, with 89 percent of its donations going to politicians and law enforcement officials in its home state of Missouri.

“They tried to buy everyone,” says Nan Fowler, a former NPS account executive in Illinois. NPS officials did not respond to our calls for comment on this story.

NPS in the Top 10 of Funeral Service Donors

NPS’ contributions amounted to about a third of what SCI spent on political contributions between 1999 and 2006, according to the National Institute on Money in State Politics. The nonprofit, nonpartisan group, based in Helena, Mont., released a report this month on the funeral industry’s political giving called “From Coffins to Coffers.”

SCI ranked third on the Institute’s list. NPS, SCI and Palm Mortuaries in Nevada were the only non-association donors on the Institute’s Top 10 list.

The high level of NPS’s campaign donations comes to light at a time when many FDs—particularly in Missouri—are complaining that regulators did not act swiftly enough.

about us

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“[Missouri Attorney General Jay Nixon] *still* hasn’t caught on,” says Jim Buchholz of Buchholz Mortuaries in St. Louis. “He’s sitting back. We’re known as the Show-Me state, but he hasn’t shown me anything.”

“I think something is fishy,” adds Connie James of James and Gahr Funeral Home in Saint James, who e-mailed Nixon earlier this year to complain about his office’s handling of NPS. “I can’t give [Nixon] anything. This is the second time it’s happened on his watch.”

Nixon settled out of court with NPS in 2005, after conducting a preneed sweep that resulted in criminal charges against three owners of funeral homes and four monument companies.

But two months later, when Nixon announced he was running for governor, NPS and its affiliate companies were among his earliest contributors of campaign cash, donating at least \$2,500 over a two-month period. (Electronic records with the Missouri Ethics Commission show donations of \$10,000 to Nixon, although some of those contributions may have been counted twice.)

No Impropriety, Attorney General’s Aide Says

Nixon’s office was not actively investigating NPS in 2005 and 2006, when the company made its contributions to Nixon’s run for governor, says Scott Holste, a Nixon spokesperson.

Moreover, while it’s true that Nixon won a \$5 million consent judgment against NPS in 1993, the attorney general would normally launch an investigation only if prompted by the state funeral board. That didn’t happen until November 2007, Holste says.

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Nixon, a Democrat, is a four-term attorney general currently considered the frontrunner for the governor's office. In 2000, he won a judgment in the U.S. Supreme Court upholding campaign contribution limits. He also played a role in the formation of two large healthcare foundations in Missouri, and in 2001 won a major settlement against tobacco companies.

There's nothing illegal about a candidate taking contributions from a company he or she is investigating, explains Meredith McGehee, policy director at the Campaign Legal Center, a Washington, D.C., think tank specializing in campaign finance. But it can be *ethically* questionable—not to mention the fact that it doesn't look good.

"Particularly for the field of law enforcement, it's very clear when you're investigating a company that there's an appearance of corruption and the potential for conflict of interest [if a candidate accepts money from the target of an investigation]," McGehee says.

At the same time, these situations are not unheard of. "If you want to run for office, you have to raise a heck of a lot of money, and it has to come from somewhere," McGehee observes. "Many politicians really don't know where it comes from. They can't be too picky. But you do have an ethical obligation to have a clue."

Inside NPS' Pattern of Giving

Nixon wasn't the only beneficiary of NPS money in Missouri. The company, its affiliates and executives also gave contributions to state Lt. Gov. Peter Kinder, Sen. Tom Dempsey, Sen. Jim Lembke, Sen. Robert Mayer and Sen. Tom Shivley since 2006.

According to the Missouri Ethics Commission Web site, NPS also gave at least \$8,750 to Gov. Bob Holden (whose term expired in 2005) and at least \$8,075 to Gov. Matt Blunt, the incumbent whose term expires next year. Blunt will not seek re-election.

The company's involvement with Missouri's officials doesn't end there. In 2000, NPS hired Randy Singer, director of the state's Division of Professional Registration, as a corporate recruiter. Singer ultimately rose to the role of president of Lincoln Memorial Life, NPS' sister company in Austin, Texas.

NPS is currently in receivership, on the order of the Texas Department of Insurance (FSI 5/26/08). The department says it is working to rehabilitate the company and pay its creditors. ♦

Who at NPS Gave Contributions?

In Missouri, candidates for statewide office are currently limited to raising \$1,350 per election from each individual, business or interest group. NPS stayed below the limits by spreading donations across employees, family members and other entities, including the following:

- Angela M. Doebber [executive assistant]
- Brett C. Gaither [NPS vice president]
- Brent R. Cassity [executive officer]
- Forever Network
- J.D. Cassity [Brent's father]
- James Crawford [NPS CEO]
- Julie Cassity [Brent's wife]
- Mary J. Rebmann [communications specialist]
- Michael R. Butler [Forever Enterprises' CFO]
- National Prearranged Political Action Committee
- National Prearranged Services
- National Prearranged Services Committee for Good Government
- Nicki Province [HR director and legal supervisor]
- Randall J. Singer [Lincoln Memorial president]
- Randall K. Sutton [NPS president prior to Nicki Province]
- Rhonda Cassity [Brent's mother]
- Roxanne Schnieders [president of corporate development]