

## POLITICS

# Caldwell Aide Works Campaign For Free But Gets City Contracts

Glenna Wong doesn't seem to get paid for campaign work, but she has received city contracts worth tens of thousands of dollars.

---

ABOUT 8 HOURS AGO · By Nick Grube   

Share 5

Share 1

---

Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell's campaign spokeswoman has been awarded tens of thousands of dollars worth of city contracts, but apparently doesn't get paid for her campaign work.

Glenna Wong has been Caldwell's most visible public relations consultant since at least his 2012 campaign, when he ran for mayor against then-incumbent Peter Carlisle and former Hawaii Gov. Ben Cayetano.

Wong has not received any payment for this work, according to Hawaii Campaign Spending Commission [data](#), other than a \$2,154 in-kind expenditure that appears to be a reimbursement for food and beverages for a campaign event at the Outrigger Canoe Club.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

*Glenna Wong, middle, walks with Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell after a sign waving event in front of Honolulu Hale.*

The [data shows](#) Caldwell also listed the \$2,154 as a campaign contribution from Wong. From June 2012 to April 2016, Wong has given Caldwell's campaign nearly \$2,000. The data does not include any contributions that might have been made after Aug. 13.

But city purchasing records going back to 2010 and obtained by Civil Beat through a public records request show that Wong's company received contracts in 2014 and 2015 worth a total of \$52,460 to work on two of Caldwell's initiatives to combat homelessness.

Wong was hired by the city as a consultant to do public relations and community outreach for Caldwell's [Housing First program](#) and the [Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness](#), which is [part of a national initiative](#) run through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

**“It gives the impression that there is some sort of quid pro quo. And that’s the thing about these relationships. That appearance is very damaging.” — Colin Moore, University of Hawaii Public Policy Center**

According to Gary Kurokawa, deputy director of the Department of Budget and Fiscal Services, Wong’s company, [Glenna Wong Public Relations](#), was both the lowest bidder and highest scorer in the evaluation process for each contract.

He said in an email that Wong’s Housing First contract started out at \$14,659, but that there was a “necessary extension” that added an additional \$13,612 to the

base amount. The veteran homelessness contract was worth \$24,188.

Other companies that had applied to be outreach consultants included Strategic Communication Solutions, The Kalaimoku Group, Mana Means Communications and the Bennett Group, one of the most high-profile public relations firms in Honolulu.

Caldwell refused to discuss the matter with Civil Beat. Wong did not respond to Civil Beat’s messages requesting an interview.

According to [Wong’s website](#), her firm has been in the PR and promotions business for more than 20 years. Some of her top clients include businesses and contractors, such as Gentry Homes, Commercial Roofing & Waterproofing Hawaii and CLIMA-TEKNOLOGIES, a solar air conditioning company.

Her portfolio also lists the work she’s done with Caldwell’s campaign, as well as other “government/civic” initiatives, such as homelessness and affordable housing.

## **City Rules Violated?**

Honolulu Ethics Commission Associate Legal Counsel Laurie Wong-Nowinski declined to comment on whether the situation violated city rules until she had more information. Civil Beat provided her with copies of the contracts.

Hawaii has [banned government contractors](#) from giving money to political candidates. But the law doesn’t prevent individuals from donating their own money so long as it doesn’t come

from the business treasury.

Gary Kam, who is general counsel for the Hawaii Campaign Spending Commission, said his agency is working on new rules that would make it illegal for the sole proprietor of a business to donate to political candidates while working under government contract. The guidelines have yet to be finalized.

Kam added that current campaign spending law doesn't consider volunteer work to be the same as a monetary donation even if that work is for professional services, such as public relations.

Even if Wong's contracts with the city don't violate any laws, Colin Moore, director of the University of Hawaii's [Public Policy Center](#), said Caldwell should worry about the public perception that is created when the mayor's office is found to be paying tens of thousands of dollars in taxpayer funds to someone who is so intimately tied to his campaign.

Moore said there should be a clearly defined wall between an elected official's campaign activities and official duties. Wong's contracts, he said, appear to blur that line.

"I find it troubling because of her level of involvement in the campaign," Moore said. "It gives the impression that there is some sort of quid pro quo. And that's the thing about these relationships. That appearance is very damaging."

He said voters are already cynical about "pay-to-play" politics because of the perception that people who donate time or money to a candidate will somehow be rewarded with special treatment.

Hawaii has a [long history of pay-to-play politics](#), which resulted in huge fines and criminal charges for several people in the early 2000s. The issue was also a [major campaign theme](#) in the 2012 mayoral election when a super PAC operated by the Pacific Resource Partnership attempted to tie the practice to Cayetano, who was Caldwell's toughest opponent in the race.

The super PAC's message seemed to resonate. Cayetano lost in the general election despite being by far the leading vote-getter in the primary.

Moore said Caldwell's office made a "clumsy" decision when it hired Wong to do public relations for the mayor's homelessness initiatives. He added that it could cause more of a perception problem than when city employees are sign-waving or attending campaign events

during normal work hours.

Caldwell recently [faced an ethics complaint](#) for such a scenario, but the case was dismissed after officials said that city employees who donned Caldwell T-shirts and participated in events had used their vacation time.

“It seems a little more sneaky this way than if the mayor’s spokesman is taking vacation time to campaign for him because that’s a very clear connection,” Moore said. “If you didn’t do your homework you would never realize that this PR person (Wong) does significant business with the city.”

To print the document, click the "Original Document" link to open the original PDF. At this time it is not possible to print the document with annotations.

To print the document, click the "Original Document" link to open the original PDF. At this time it is not possible to print the document with annotations.

To print the document, click the "Original Document" link to open the original PDF. At this time it is not possible to print the document with annotations.

Follow Civil Beat on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). You can also sign up for Civil Beat's free [daily newsletter](#).

### About the Author



CIVIL BEAT STAFF

**Nick Grube** [Twitter](#) [Email](#) [RSS](#)

Nick Grube is a reporter for Civil Beat. You can reach him by email at [nick@civilbeat.org](mailto:nick@civilbeat.org) or follow him on Twitter at [@nickgrube](https://twitter.com/nickgrube).

**Use the RSS feed to subscribe to Nick Grube's posts today**

Honolulu Civil Beat uses Civil Comments to encourage robust community discussion of articles and issues. Learn more in the [Civil Comments user guide](#). Or simply get started by creating an account and logging in. You can flag a comment for review by clicking the flag. *(Note: Comments before May 18, 2016 will remain on our previous Facebook commenting system.)*

 COMMENTS (8)[LOG IN](#)

Post your comment...

SUBMIT

Sort comments by

[Highest rated](#)Bart Dame *3 minutes ago*

Full disclosure, while not a "supporter" of Caldwell, I did vote for him and intend to do so in the General.

I have trouble with the standard which posits behavior is "unethical" if it is PERCEIVED as unethical. How does a subjective standard become an objective violation simply because some people assume something improper is occurring? This is particular troubling when few people had that perception about Wong until this article appeared and asks Colin Moore to offer that opinion. Thereby creating a perception, which then triggers the "perception" of impropriety standard.

The article insinuates a "quid pro quo." To help us evaluate this insinuation, shouldn't there be some evidence that the services Wong provided the city were over-priced relative to competing bids? Is it possible Wong, as a Caldwell supporter, may have provided better service at a lower price point? The article provides no basis on which to judge that alternate, and plausible, interpretation?

Carolyn Weygan *41 minutes ago*

It is actually more surprising that the described tasks needed to be outsourced.

1

Translator *1 hour ago*

Graft?

Graft.



kateinhi 1 hour ago

W/o comment fr Caldwell / Wong for this report, strategy might be that the matter will fade away, as in other unethical political glad handing. Problem is, monkey-see-monkey-do, tacitly-approved business dealings permeate down to levels like condo mgmnt where glad handing is bankrupting reserves....re. CB archives "Condo Brutality".

---



Choon James 45 minutes ago

Mayor Kirk Caldwell: " It's not "pay to play". It's service. Civil Beat, you're denigrating a service!"

---



Thomas Dye 1 hour ago

Michael Matsumoto of SSFM paid to play \$7,000,000 in city contracts under mayor Jeremy Harris, who counted on some of the \$400,000 in illegal political contributions funneled through Matsumoto.

Wong's PR firm had \$52,000 in city contracts over 2 years and Wong volunteers her personal time to speak for the Caldwell campaign.

It seems quite a stretch to equate the two.

1

---



Lisa Ho 25 minutes ago

Well guess who's wife works at SSFM ray soon mayors chief of staff.. more pay to play.. oh wait service..nick please do story on this too.. the taxpayers had enough



Patricia Blair 1 hour ago

Thanks, Nick, for doing the research and raising the question of ethics of Caldwell.

1

---

**SUPPORT NONPROFIT, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM TODAY!**

I would like to donate

 One-Time  Monthly  Yearly**DONATE NOW** Secured by **stripe**

If your organization would like to make a donation, please contact us at [business@civilbeat.org](mailto:business@civilbeat.org).

Prefer to mail a check? Our mailing address is 3465 Waialae Avenue, Suite 200, Honolulu, HI 96816.