

## HAWAII

# How Hawaii Lawmakers Spend Up to \$13,000 a Year — Each

**UPDATED** State ethics director Les Kondo may be under fire, but he seems to have gotten their attention. A review of this year's spending shows legislators are much less inclined to spend public money on questionable expenses.

JULY 8, 2015 • By Nathan Eagle   

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**Updated 3:15 p.m., 7/8/2015**

Hawaii lawmakers have had a rocky relationship with state Ethics Commission Executive Director Les Kondo ever since he was appointed in 2011.

Many have been less than thrilled with his strict interpretation of the Ethics Code and opinions on what [gifts they are allowed to accept](#) from lobbyists, or what events they can attend with [complimentary tickets](#).

Legislative allowances have been another sore point. But a Civil Beat review of nearly \$4 million in state lawmakers' expenses over the past four years shows they are changing their habits based on the commission's advice even if they don't like it — including not billing taxpayers for their dry cleaning or charitable donations.

“We’ve tightened up use for personal items, partly due to the attention it’s gotten by the Ethics Commission, but partially also because it made sense,” said House Chief Clerk Brian Takeshita, who reviews and approves expenses for the 51 state representatives.

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Cory Lum/Civil Beat

*State lawmakers on the House floor as the 2015 legislative session convened in January. Most lawmakers spend a sizable portion of their annual legislative allowance on food, leis and other expenses for opening day festivities.*

But some expenses continue to raise eyebrows.

Rep. Bob McDermott, a well-known critic of the state's controversial Pono Choices sexual health curriculum, spent almost \$2,500 to fly Dr. Joe McIlhaney in from Texas to talk about the "indoctrination of our children" when it comes to sex education, put him up in a hotel and [make a video of the event](#).

McIlhaney, an obstetrician-gynecologist, served on President George W. Bush's Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. He's much loved by Christian conservatives who support abstinence-only sex education in schools, but criticized by some people over his disdain for groups like Planned Parenthood and his opposition to gay "lifestyles."

McDermott, an Oahu Republican, said he brought in McIlhaney to speak last April at the Capitol about how young girls are given incomplete and inaccurate information about sex. For example, he said they should be told condoms don't fully protect against the spread of HPV, commonly known as genital warts, a growing concern in Hawaii.

"It's like putting a raincoat on and going swimming in the ocean; it's useless," he said.

"I was doing a public service getting the information out there for people to hear," McDermott said.



*Rep. Bob McDermott, seen here testifying last month at a Board of Education hearing on sex education, spent more than \$2,000 of his legislative allowance to bring a conservative speaker from Texas to discuss the "indoctrination of our children."*

McDermott was the only lawmaker to use his allowance to fly in someone from the mainland, although other lawmakers brought people from the neighbor islands and flew their staff around for events. House Speaker Joe Souki pre-approves travel expenses before passing them to Takeshita.

“McDermott’s reason for bringing in a speaker was to discuss a specific issue that was before the Legislature, so my judgment was that it was allowable,” Takeshita said.

Stationery was a big expense for a couple of legislators.

Rep. Calvin Say spent almost \$2,500 on personalized letters and envelopes. Rep. Dee Morikawa, the only other lawmaker to have personalized stationery, spent \$500.

Rep. Justin Woodson, a Maui lawmaker, racked up bills totaling more than \$3,300 since January on car-rental fees. His colleagues from the Valley Isle had transportation expenses as well, but far less.

Sen. Gil Keith-Agaran paid \$420 to ship his personal vehicle to and from Oahu for the legislative session, which started in January and ended in May.

Souki spends \$219 a month leasing a car from Honda to use when he’s working on Oahu.

“It’s cheaper,” he said, noting he doesn’t have a car he could ship over from Maui.

In the past, Souki said he rented a car but was spending upwards of \$700 a month.

“What I’m trying to do is save money,” he said, adding that he’s encouraged other neighbor island lawmakers to follow his lead.

The vehicle Souki now uses is under a three-year lease agreement, which he said he’ll be stuck paying if he leaves office before it’s up.

“I’m optimistic I’m going to win the next election,” he said with a chuckle.

## **No More Dry Cleaning Bills**

The legislative allowance, which increases slightly each year, is \$13,008 per lawmaker in 2015. The money is intended to cover incidental expenses connected with their official duties.

That's on top of annual salaries of \$59,004, except for the Senate president and House speaker, who each make \$66,504.

**Update** Neighbor-island lawmakers in the House get an additional \$1,200 per month for travel to Oahu, plus a per diem of \$175 a day to cover food, lodging and incidental expenses.

On the Senate side, neighbor-island lawmakers get one round-trip flight per week plus two additional round-trips per month during session and one additional round-trip per month for non-Oahu senators representing more than one island. A non-Oahu Senate president — such as Ron Kouchi, the current president, who represents Kauai and Niihau — is authorized eight round-trip flights per month.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

*Senate President Ron Kouchi, second from left, heads to a meeting in the Capitol with Sen. Kalani English, left, and Sen. Will Espero. English and Kouchi stopped using their legislative allowance for dry cleaning after new ethics guidelines came out last year.*

Even though the [friction continues](#) between Kondo and legislative leaders, lawmakers have for the most part heeded the guidance that the [Ethics Commission provided last year](#) after concerns arose over how they were using their allowance.

In 2014, Sens. Kalani English and Kouchi used the funds to cover their dry-cleaning bills, one of many things the commission later identified as expenses “not reasonably related to official legislative duties.”

No lawmaker has used his or her allowance for dry cleaning so far this year and other expenses on the commission’s probably-not-OK list have similarly stopped.

Sen. Maile Shimabukuro didn’t use her allowance this year to help publicize the Ask-A-Lawyer event or to buy bus passes or garlic salt as she did last year.

And Rep. Ty Cullen and Sen. Les Ihara no longer use theirs to cover Sierra Club and ACLU membership dues.

## **From Food to Furniture**

Sen. Suzanne Chun Oakland, like many of her colleagues, spent several hundred dollars on food for the Legislature’s opening day in January. And, again like most of her fellow senators and friends in the House, bought food for numerous lunch and dinner meetings and for staff during the most hectic times in the session.

Food, conferences on the mainland and end-of-session mailers to constituents — often pamphlets highlighting what laws passed and upcoming events — comprise the bulk of expenses made using state legislative allowances.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat



*Rep. Sam Kong likes his favorite character, Sponge Bob, as a couch decoration. The freshman Democrat spent more than \$2,200 of his legislative allowance on office furniture, more than most other state lawmakers.*

Another big purchase that's been permitted is furniture.

Generally, members get standard sets of furniture when they move into an office, Takeshita said. Sometimes they want a couch or additional chairs or shelves.

"If it's a useful item and enhances the office's professionalism, we'll allow it," he said.

The lawmakers don't get to keep the furniture though. If it's purchased with a legislative allowance, the state owns the property.

New Democratic lawmakers spent a chunk of their allowances setting up their offices.

Rep. Matt LoPresti spent more than \$1,500 on a couch from Inspiration Furniture. Rep. Sam Kong spent over \$2,200 getting his office furniture from Fisher Hawaii. And Rep. Jarrett Keohokalole, another freshman, spent over \$1,200 getting his office furniture from Rent-A-Center.

LoPresti said the couch, a floor model he bought at half price, is “nothing fancy.”

“They give staff a desk and a simple chair but nothing for constituents,” he said.

LoPresti and his staff furnished the rest of his office themselves, bringing in folding chairs from home, a microwave and coffee maker. He also inherited an old tube-screen TV and refrigerator from a previous lawmaker.

“I’m trying to be as frugal as possible,” he said.

**Update** Kong said he started work with a bare office so had to buy some furniture.

“There was nothing, literally,” he said. “The furniture was a one-time purchase and hopefully it last for years.”

Kong said he’s a businessman with a fiscally conservative mindset.

“I try not to spend any money, period,” he said.

McDermott considers using the allowance for furniture to be a waste of taxpayer money.

“I’ve got the Capitol-issued furniture,” he said. “We’re a bare bones shop.”

Sen. Sam Slom, the chamber’s lone Republican, has never used any of his allowance since first being elected in 1996. By his accounting, this has saved taxpayers more than \$130,000.

## **Guidelines Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?**

The Ethics Commission took up legislative allowances last fall after a [two-part report](#) by Civil Beat highlighted how lawmakers were using their allowances.

Souki and then-Senate President Donna Mercado Kim wrote letters to Kondo at the time, asserting the Legislature’s independence over how lawmakers spend the money.

Despite their objections, the commission adopted the new guidelines in at 3-2 vote at its June 2014 meeting. The commission decided the allowance shouldn't be used to pay for expenses "not reasonably related to official legislative duties," including cough drops, birthday cakes, charitable donations or membership fees to business or community organizations.

"Members themselves have been more careful about these things, so I'm seeing fewer that I would otherwise deny," Takeshita said. "Truth be told, the 'iffy' claims were always pretty small to begin with."

Souki said the Ethics Commission's guidance was circulated to lawmakers and that's the reason their allowances are being used differently.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat



*Ethics Commission Executive Director Les Kondo has been under fire for his rigid interpretation of the Ethics Code since his appointment in 2011.*

How long the commission's guidelines will stand is up for debate now that the makeup of the commission has changed and pressure to remove Kondo continues to mount from legislative leaders.

David O'Neal and Ruth Tschumy, the two members who voted against the guidelines, are still on the commission and two of the three members who supported it — Leolani Abdul and Chair Edward Broglio — are now gone.

Susan DeGuzman, the third member who voted in favor of the new guidelines, continues to serve on the commission. Melinda Wood is a new member and there is one vacancy.

Kondo was [fighting to keep his job](#) after Souki wrote a scathing letter in April calling on the commission to disavow any directives it has issued since he's been executive director.

The commission decided last month that Kondo would continue to serve as executive director. But with Broglio's departure since then, there will be a new person steering the commission who could change that.

Kondo declined to comment on the expenses lawmakers made this past session using their allowances.

"We expect the commission will review the disbursements and expenditures in the near future," he said.

*The Senate's 2014 and 2015 legislative allowances:*

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.

*The House's 2014 legislative allowances:*

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.

*The House's 2015 legislative allowances:*

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**Dino W. Buchanan** · University of Wisconsin - Whitewater

"McDermott, a Big Island Republican," : Big Island? Since when did he move and start serving outside of Ewa? Terrible reporting once again.

Like · Reply · Jul 8, 2015 11:02am



**Richard Wiens** · News Editor at Honolulu Civil Beat

Fixed awhile ago. Thanks for reading.

Like · Reply · Jul 8, 2015 11:54am



**Tom Greenleaf** · Western New Mexico University

This kind of reporting is crucial in holding our legislators accountable. Once again Bob McDermott wins the title of biggest clown at the circus.

Like · Reply · 3 · Jul 8, 2015 12:25pm



**Aaron Woods** · GIS Analyst (Geographic Information Systems Analyst) at Honolulu Board of

**Water Supply**

I'm curious how Sam came up with a 1996-2015 Savings of 130,000 (by not using any of his annual allowance). If the allowance is 13,000 this year, and he hasn't used any for 19 years, shouldn't the savings be over 190000....

Like · Reply · Jul 8, 2015 1:34pm



**Nathan Eagle** · Works at Honolulu Civil Beat

The allowance has gradually grown to become \$13,000 this year.

Like · Reply · Jul 8, 2015 6:24pm



**Keith Rollman** · Proprietor/Owner at R Strategic Communications

Not sure how McDermott's use of his office allowance to bring in a medical expert for a public meeting on a relevant legislative matter qualifies as an "eyebrow raising" event. Especially since it was pre-approved by Speaker Souki and the House Clerk beforehand. Hawaii's residents have the right to get complete and accurate information on important issues, not just biased media propaganda and flak from name-calling online commentators (I'm looking at you Tom).

Like · Reply · Jul 8, 2015 3:22pm · Edited



**Tom Greenleaf** · Western New Mexico University

What kind of expert believes teaching children about sex education is indoctrination, hates on Planned Parenthood for providing basic reproductive health care to women, and thinks homosexuality is a lifestyle choice? An ideologue is who. Once again McDermott easily wins the title of biggest clown. And it's not easy in the Hawaii legislature, but he manages.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Jul 10, 2015 2:24am



**Carol Tokunaga** · Honolulu, Hawaii

Hooray for Les Kondo, and Sam Slom. Public service to the max.

Like · Reply ·  4 · Jul 8, 2015 7:51pm



**Shane Albritton** · Haiku, Hawaii

Nathan Eagle - What does it mean when it says "exceeded pCard limit" several times on Joe Souki's allowances? Also, if I'm reading that correctly, he's leasing a Honda with public money? I also find it interesting that he spent nearly 1,600 on "Opening Day Refreshments" etc, when people like Kaniela Ing spent about \$500.

Like · Reply · Jul 10, 2015 9:55pm



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