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Term limit measure lures health care donors

Officials deny there's a link of gaining lobbyist access by giving to top lawmakers' cause.

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Health-related organizations this year have contributed at least \$500,000 to a ballot campaign to ease term limits that would benefit top lawmakers leading the health care overhaul under consideration at the Capitol.

Hospitals, drug companies, doctors, dentists and others with a stake in the health care debate have put up about a fifth of the roughly \$2.6 million collected by those advocating a change in the 1990 term limits law. The measure, if passed by voters Feb. 5, would lower from 14 to 12 the total number of years a lawmaker could serve, but also would allow Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez and Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata to remain in their leadership posts for up to six and four years, respectively, beyond 2008.

Some health care donors are giving to the term limits committee, run by Núñez's top political adviser, without even officially supporting the measure they are financially backing.

One donor said his organization gave to guarantee access to the top players in the health care debate.

"The whole system of campaign fundraising is such that you have a (political action committee) because you want to get access to people," said Gary Robinson, the executive director of the Union of American Physicians and Dentists, which gave \$5,000 to the term limits measure in late June.

"I think everybody's contribution relates to the ability to go to the fundraisers and meet the staff and the members," Robinson said.

The speaker's office took issue with that assessment.

"The speaker has a giant firewall between policy and fundraising," said Núñez spokesman Steve Maviglio. "If anybody expects to have preferential treatment, the speaker would be happy to have their names so he can give them their money back."

Other health care groups that have given to the term limits measure said there is no connection to the health debate at the Capitol.

"We make contributions from our issues PAC every year on ballot measures and not all of them are related to health," said Jan Emerson, spokeswoman for the California Hospital Association, which supports the measure. Emerson said changing legislative terms would create "more effective government."

The hospital association's PAC gave \$100,000 in May, two weeks before both Perata and Núñez rolled out their health plans.

Unlike Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's plan, neither Democrat included an assessment on hospitals. (The hospitals also gave the governor's political fund \$100,000.) Maviglio said that's only because the hospital assessment is "a tax that's unconstitutional."

Some donors have been treated poorly by term limits advocates.

Blue Cross gave \$50,000 to the term limits effort. But after launching a media campaign comparing health care changes to California's failed energy deregulation experiment, the insurance company was publicly criticized by Democrats, including Núñez.

Still, Robert Stern, president of the Center for Governmental Studies, said the large donations are a way for industry to gain "unfair access."

"These people are afraid not to give," Stern said. "If they don't (give), they might have a place at the table, but they might not be listened to."

By far the biggest donors to the term limits campaign have been unions.

The Service Employees International Union Local 1000 gave \$150,000. The California State Council of Service Employees gave \$200,000. And the teachers association chipped in \$250,000. Unionized health care workers have given thousands more.

The unions have lobbied against the portion of the governor's health plan requiring everyone to buy insurance -- termed an "individual mandate." There is no individual mandate in the Democratic proposal.

Health care has been a hot topic since January, when Schwarzenegger declared, "This year we must take action on health care."

The Republican governor unveiled an ambitious universal care proposal mandating every state resident have health insurance. Under Schwarzenegger's plan, the state would help those unable to pay by assessing doctors 2 percent and hospitals 4 percent of their revenue, while making employers pay a 4 percent payroll fee.