



**Testimony of Sheila Krumholz, Executive Director of the Center for Responsive Politics
to the House Committee on Appropriations Legislative Branch Subcommittee
re: Improving Lobbyist Tracking Data**

April 17, 2018

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Ryan and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Sheila Krumholz. I am executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization founded 35 years ago by former Senators Democrat Frank Church and Republican Hugh Scott. CRP monitors and analyzes federal campaign contributions and expenditures, and other forms of money and influence in U.S. politics and policy. My testimony today focuses on lobbying data, which we also gather and present on our website, OpenSecrets.org.

The offices of the Clerk of the House and Secretary of the Senate serve as the repositories for more than twenty years of data detailing the lobbying activities of thousands of organizations required to file under rules set forth by the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 and the Honest Leadership & Open Government Act of 2007. These reports serve as the basis for important public resources that allow investigations by academics, journalists and Congress itself that contribute to the integrity of policy making processes.

Annually, these reports list more than 11,000 individual lobbyists. We and others rely on this data both to populate our OpenSecrets.org website, which is free public resource, as well as to provide custom research assistance to journalists, advocates and scholars. But our core mission is to inform and engage citizens, more than 600,000 of whom visited our site seeking reliable information on money in politics last month. In the prior month,

OpenSecrets.org had more than one million visitors – so the public interest in this kind of information is substantial and that’s especially true of information about lobbying.

Unfortunately, the quality of information on federal lobbying is undermined by the lack of a key ingredient: a publicly available unique identifier to connect all of the name variations for each individual lobbyist. In fact, our research finds that over the last twenty years, an average of 12 percent of names reported annually are extraneous variations due to typos, nicknames, and name changes. So CRP researchers invest a lot of work to normalize lobbyist names to improve data accuracy and to facilitate tracking their employment history and political campaign contributions. We reconcile the different versions as well as verify that individuals with similar or common names are in fact, different people. Changes to a lobbyist's legal name based on changed marital status are common and present further challenges.

Our researchers put considerable effort into creating and maintaining a version of lobbyist IDs through algorithmic matching as well as human review. Following each quarterly filing deadline, we spend a full day reconciling name variations and changes in associated registrants, delaying the release of an improved data set – all of which would be unnecessary if information already collected were converted into a publicly accessible identifier.

Based on official filing manuals, the Clerk of the House and Secretary of the Senate assign a unique identifier to each lobbyist during the filing process that is used internally to track each person across time and across reports, including registrations and quarterly activity reports for multiple lobbying firms. However, the downloadable data released to the public does not include unique IDs.

The Honest Leadership & Open Government Act’s revolving door provisions make clear that Congress sees tracking registered lobbyists’ employment across government and the

private sector as essential to monitor for conflicts of interest – which it is. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) undertakes an annual review of LDA compliance and recently found that 15 percent of filed reports fail to fully disclose previous government employment as required.¹ The ability to easily and accurately identify individuals through their lobbying careers is critical to research and oversight by the press and civil society to fill that gap. Furthermore, the lobbyists themselves want the information about their activities to be accurate, based on the calls we receive from them whenever they are misidentified.

We are not requesting changes to the form that lobbyists use to submit their reports. All lobbyists use a unique ID to sign into the online system to submit their reports. It is available only to them and internally at the offices of the Clerk of the House and Secretary of the Senate. We believe it is possible to generate from those private IDs a public-facing unique ID that can be released in the XML data files. If the addition of such identifiers is not possible at this time, we request that a study is undertaken to determine the feasibility of doing so in the future.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak today, your work in support of transparency, and for considering this small, but important change that will advance transparency and the accuracy of information on federal lobbying. Thank you.

¹ “GAO 2017 Lobbying Disclosure: Observations on Lobbyists’ Compliance with Disclosure Requirements,” March 2018: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/690988.pdf>