A Powerful Pritzker Administration Insider Cashed In as a Consultant

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Shortly after she left her state job as a senior adviser to Gov. J.B. Pritzker, longtime political operative Nikki Budzinski collected more than $500,000 in consulting and other fees in 10 months, including more than $80,000 from a Springfield lobbyist Budzinski helped while working for the governor.

At least $100,000 of that payday came from progressive organizations that don’t disclose their donors — despite Budzinski now running for Congress downstate as a Democrat in the 13th District on a platform that includes getting “dark money” out of politics, a Better Government Association examination of government records found.
The lobbyist who paid Budzinski $82,810 after Budzinski left the Pritzker administration is longtime Springfield operative Julie Curry.

A BGA review of state and federal public records shows a cozy relationship between Budzinski and Curry, who frequently reached out when her clients needed assistance, whether it was to set up a meeting with the governor for a client or access for an event at the governor’s mansion.

One expert said Budzinski’s actions after she left the Pritzker administration highlight weaknesses in Illinois’ ethics laws.

State workers are generally barred from accepting compensation as a lobbyist for one year after leaving government work. Since Budzinski was not a registered lobbyist, but rather worked as a consultant to the lobbyist paying her, Illinois’ executive order did not apply to her, records and interviews show.

“The law should also include work for a lobbying firm,” Southern Illinois University law professor and former lieutenant governor Sheila Simon told the BGA.

Budzinski, 45, declined a BGA interview request and would not respond to detailed written questions about her consulting business or work inside the Pritzker administration. Neither Curry nor Budzinski would describe the work Budzinski did for Curry’s lobbying firm.

“Nikki has always taken state and federal ethics laws very seriously and will continue to do so if elected to Congress,” her campaign manager Josh Roesch wrote in a brief email. “After Nikki left government, she was never a lobbyist, never registered as a state or federal lobbyist, and she complied with all ethics laws.”

A longtime political operative in Illinois and nationally, Budzinski had served as labor outreach director for Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign after serving in policy positions for unions for 10 years. She started as one of Pritzker’s earliest campaign aides in 2017 and later became executive director of Pritzker’s transition team before taking a state job as the governor’s senior adviser. The Pritzker campaign paid Budzinski $322,363 — making her one of its highest paid staffers, according to a BGA analysis of state election reports. Starting in 2019 as a senior adviser to the governor, Budzinski was paid $278,000 a year, among a
handful of trusted aides who had their state salaries doubled after Pritzker dipped into his personal wealth using his company East Jackson Street LLC.

In public, Budzinski stood by Pritzker’s side at meetings with labor leaders and downstate public figures. Behind closed doors, she took part in weekly meetings with the governor, his chief of staff, the four deputy governors and Pritzker’s general counsel, according to the governor’s calendar and state emails. She was the governor’s point person on labor issues and Internet broadband, and played a key role in briefing the governor on gaming.

This BGA account is based on state and federal public records including email exchanges between Curry and Pritzker administration officials, the governor’s calendars, IRS filings, campaign spending reports, corporate records and Budzinski’s ethics disclosure forms.

“Nikki is widely beloved downstate and is a close ally and friend,” Pritzker told reporters when she left state government in 2020. “She is also the first person who supported me, helped me to decide to run for governor and helped put together my campaign from our earliest days. As a senior adviser, she was a valued voice in the administration.”

**Curry connection**

At times, Budzinski used her voice in the Pritzker administration on behalf of a person she called “my friend,” Curry.
Springfield lobbyist Julie Curry (Illinois Secretary of State)

Unlike Illinois lobbyists who depict the Capitol Dome on their websites and tout their connections, Curry’s firm has no social media visibility and registers only her as its exclusive lobbyist.

Yet from the first days Pritzker took office in January 2019, Curry had the ear of Budzinski, government emails show.

Curry reached out to Budzinski that month to set up a Pritzker meeting with top executives from Curry’s client Centene Corp., the Fortune 500 Medicaid contractor.

“Let me circle back to you,” Budzinski quickly responded.

Curry soon was in contact with the deputy governor for healthcare, Sol Flores, who helped set up an April 2019 meeting between Pritzker and the CEO of Centene.

Curry later sought Budzinski’s advice when she could not reach Flores and her deputy to iron out some last minute logistics with Pritzker’s appearance at a Centene ribbon cutting in May 2019 in Carbondale.

In addition to the Medicaid powerhouse Centene, Curry’s 2019 and 2020 clients...
included the cable industry trade group, a gaming company and local governments.

Budzinski helped Curry in other ways important to the lobbyist by making introductions to top Pritzker staffers and providing Curry with details of the governor’s legislative positions and schedule.

Curry had been Macon County treasurer before serving for eight years in the General Assembly representing an East Central Illinois district. In 2003 and 2004 Curry was deputy chief of staff for economy and labor in the administration of then Gov. Rod Blagojevich, responsible for the management and oversight of 16 state agencies, according to the resume Curry provided to a state commission. She opened her lobbying firm in 2008.

Budzinski introduced Curry as “my friend Julie” in an email to Deputy Governor Jesse Ruiz after Curry got a $60,000-a-year state contract to be the legislative consultant to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission from the Pritzker administration. Ruiz was the deputy governor in charge of education at the time. Both the governor’s office and the commission said Budzinski played no role in Curry’s contract.

Curry requested Budzinski’s help in getting access to the governor’s mansion in March 2019 for an event involving the House Democratic Women’s Caucus, according to an email. The event was attended by the governor and first lady.

Curry also asked for Budzinski’s help in getting a cable company executive, who was also an officer for the Cable Television & Communications Association of Illinois, appointed to a working group of the state’s Broadband Advisory Council, which was advising the rollout of the state’s $420 million investment in broadband infrastructure, according to another email.

Budzinski was chairman of the council, and Curry was a lobbyist for the association.

The cable company executive was appointed to the state working group, records show, which gave her a prestigious role in shaping state policy. The Pritzker administration said the council by statute requires industry representation.

Budzinski, who briefed the governor on gaming, also forwarded to Curry
information shared among the governor’s top staffers on the gaming expansion bill shortly before it was voted on in 2019. Two of Curry’s clients were in the gaming industry - the U.S. sports betting company DraftKings, and local gaming executive Rick Heidner, who was amid an ultimately unsuccessful bid to get state approvals to build a new horse racing track and casino in Tinley Park.

DraftKings and Heidner declined to comment.

The governor’s office said in an email that it “routinely shares bill analyses with stakeholders” to ensure they “understand what the governor will and won’t sign . . . Nikki did not have any role in the governor’s office in dealing with Heidner’s gaming issues.”

Budzinski complied with all required ethics reviews before leaving the administration, the governor’s office added. In response to a public records request, the governor’s office provided 41 pages of emails showing Budzinski notified them that she would be working for Curry and others.

**Dark money paychecks**

Budzinski’s separate 2020 work for “dark money” organizations contrasts with her campaign platform to “get dark money out of politics by requiring disclosure of all large dollar donations” as she runs for Congress in the newly drawn 13th District. The district was redrawn by Democrats to include African American and university communities stretching from East St. Louis to Springfield, Decatur and Champaign. She is running against Republican Regan Deering, a Decatur community activist and scion of a prominent American agribusiness family.

Budzinski’s federal forms contain a variety of inconsistencies including the amounts she was paid and by whom. But they show the candidate received more than $100,000 from politically prominent Washington D.C.-based nonprofits that do not disclose their donors.

Budzinski took in $60,000 from the Sixteen Thirty Fund, which The Atlantic called “the indisputable heavyweight of Democratic dark money.” It was co-founded by former Clinton administration appointee Eric Kessler.

In a brief email to the BGA, Sixteen Thirty denied having “the major purpose of
influencing federal elections,” and said it “empowers advocates and philanthropists to quickly and efficiently launch projects to tackle today’s toughest issues.”

In a Federal Election Commission complaint case, Sixteen Thirty said in 2020 it spent $60 million in contributions to federal political committees, out of $410 million in spending that year.

In one of Budzinski’s federal disclosure reports she listed a $60,000 paycheck as coming not from Sixteen Thirty but from a related group, Demand Justice, a courts-focused progressive group founded and run by former Hillary Clinton campaign press secretary Brian Fallon.

Demand Justice was established as a project of Sixteen Thirty, according to a Federal Election Commission filing.

Because Budzinski’s disclosure forms contain omissions and revisions, it is not clear whether that $60,000 is another reference to the work she did for Sixteen Thirty.

Demand Justice then and now advocates for reshaping the U.S. Supreme Court by adding four justices. A June 2020 Tweet from Fallon said: “Defund the police.”

Budzinski did not respond to BGA questions about whether she endorsed the positions of Demand Justice or other groups that paid her in 2020.

In 2021 Demand Justice spun off from Sixteen Thirty and became a separate dark money organization.

Budzinski also reported earning $48,000 from another organization, New Venture Fund, in 2020 for “consulting services.” Using trade names including “Demand Progress,” the New Venture Fund is a tax-exempt charity that says it works on global health, international development, education and the arts. It also was co-founded by Kessler. In 2020, New Venture reported revenue of $965 million from unidentified donors and said it gave $86 million to Sixteen Thirty.

In the Federal Election Commission complaint case, New Venture said it did not have the major purpose of influencing federal elections.

The nonprofit watchdog OpenSecrets has called New Venture and Sixteen Thirty
“sister” funds that have used more than 50 trade names in ways that leave almost no paper trail.

“The complexity of dark money groups makes it more difficult for average Americans to understand who is bankrolling campaigns and issue advocacy, and how they stand to gain or lose,” said OpenSecrets Executive Director Sheila Krumholz.

In January 2021 Budzinski went to work for six months in the Biden administration as chief of staff in the Office of Management and Budget. Then she entered the race for Congress in the 13th Congressional District.

In early 2021, when Budzinski joined the OMB, she did not list payments from Curry or New Venture Fund on her federal disclosure forms, even though that was required.

Budzinski later listed the Curry and New Venture fees on disclosure reports congressional candidates submit to the House clerk.

Besides the brief email from Sixteen Thirty, none of the entities for which Budzinski worked in 2020 responded to BGA questions.

As a congressional candidate who aims to champion working families, Budzinski says her state government accomplishments included helping pass a $15-an-hour minimum wage in Illinois and helping expand high-speed Internet across the state.

Her campaign website currently makes no mention of her time as a consultant, when she earned fees from Curry and the big-money Democratic groups.

Among the earliest supporters in Budzinski’s race for Congress were Pritzker and his wife, who each donated the maximum $5,800, records show.

Curry gave $2,900 a day before Budzinski formally announced.