

## **Congressional Staff Bonuses: Arizona members of the U.S. House of Representatives granted about \$300,000 in staff bonuses in 2008**

*Published in newspapers throughout Arizona, including the Tucson Star and Arizona Republic, December 2008, via Cronkite News Service. Byline: Christine Rogel, Cronkite News Service*

PHOENIX, AZ — While dealing with the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression, seven Arizona members of the U.S. House of Representatives granted about \$300,000 in total staff bonuses in late 2008, a Cronkite News Service review found.

All but one member, Democratic Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, rewarded staff with extra pay courtesy of taxpayers. Six members confirmed giving bonuses, and payroll data for the staff of outgoing Republican Rep. Rick Renzi showed increases consistent with bonuses.

Rep. Raúl Grijalva, a Democrat, said bonuses help keep high-quality staff members who would earn more in the private sector.

“We reward merit. That’s all we’re doing,” said Grijalva, who according to the review, granted 16 staff members a total of \$52,000 in bonuses. “It’s appropriate when available, and that’s the way you retain staff.”

Bonuses are a longstanding tradition on Capitol Hill. In 2008, House aides earned \$24.9 million more in the fourth-quarter, according to LegiStorm, an organization that publishes congressional expenditures online. That’s the largest figure Jock Friedly, LegiStorm’s president and founder, has seen since 2001.

“Bonus levels are nowhere close to the kind of thing you saw on Wall Street,” Friedly said. “But it’s coming at a time when a lot of families are struggling, and it’s not fair that we are seeing the highest bump in a long time.”

Many lawmakers were critical of financial institutions giving bonuses to top executives while receiving government aid, said Dave Levinthal,

communications director for the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan organization that tracks government spending.

“While it is certainly on a different scale, there is a pinch of irony that they would be giving taxpayer bonuses to their own staff when critical of that action in the private world,” Levinthal said.

Cronkite News Service’s review found bonuses ranging from \$136,000 for Renzi’s staff to \$13,500 for the staff of Rep. Ed Pastor, a Democrat.

While confirming giving nine aides bonuses of \$1,500 each, Pastor said his office regularly returns money to the U.S. Treasury from its annual operating budget.

“I felt that we were frugal and efficient during the year so I thought that we, meaning my staff, deserved a small bonus,” Pastor said.

Cronkite News Service examined LegiStorm’s House of Representatives payroll data back to 2001, comparing payroll in the calendar year’s fourth quarter to other quarters. When a staff

member’s fourth-quarter pay was markedly higher than the following quarter, it was considered a bonus.

For example, that methodology suggested \$13,580 in bonuses for Pastor, who confirmed bonuses totaling \$13,500.

The review found a consistent pattern of bonuses among Arizona’s representatives other than Giffords. Looking back to 2007, the total tops \$600,000.

Pastor was the only representative who provided 2008 totals. With the exception of Renzi, who didn’t respond, other offices confirmed giving bonuses but declined to provide totals, with some saying it would be inappropriate to discuss individual staffers’ pay.

The review suggested the following bonus totals for other representatives in the fourth quarter of 2008:

\_ Democratic Rep. Harry Mitchell: a total of \$38,000 for 10 staff members;

\_ Republican Rep. Jeff Flake: a total of \$36,000 for 13 staff members;

\_ Republican Rep. John Shadegg: a total of \$24,000 for nine staff members;

\_ Republican Rep. Trent Franks: a total of \$22,000 for nine staff members.

The review didn't include Democratic Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick, who replaced Renzi in January 2009.

Cronkite News Service presented bonus figures and its methodology to each congressional office, providing the opportunity, sometimes in multiple interviews, to challenge the totals.

In 2008, Arizona members received between \$1.39 million and \$1.5 million to cover office expenses, payroll and other official services according to a formula that includes the distance between a member's district and Washington, D.C., rent and home mailing addresses in the district.

Congressional offices were allowed 18 permanent and four part-time employees. Employees could earn up to \$151,000, though the average salary for a House aide among Arizona's delegation was \$48,800.

### **Here is a look at individual representatives and 2008 bonus amounts: Rep. Rick Renzi: \$136,000**

Renzi is awaiting trial on federal charges including money laundering and insurance fraud. He didn't respond to messages left with attorneys who have represented him, Washington, D.C.- based Reid Weingarten and Kelly B. Kramer, or messages left at his family business, Patriot Insurance Agency Inc. in Sonoita.

Because Renzi was at the end of his term, Cronkite News Service compared his fourth-quarter payroll with the third quarter of 2008. That view suggested bonuses for all 12 staffers.

Pete Sepp, vice president of communications with the National Taxpayers Union, an organization that advocates for lower taxes, said it's not uncommon for lawmakers to reward staff with generous bonuses when leaving office.

“There are some who would call it a golden handshake for a job well done,” Sepp said. “Others would look on it less kindly, as a last opportunity to cash in, and, of course, the most cynical would view it as an ethically embattled lawmaker kind of saying thanks for sticking behind him or her.”

### **Rep. Raúl Grijalva: \$52,000**

In an interview, Grijalva said he rewards merit with additional pay around the holidays. In general, deserving employees receive a minimum bonus payment that he wouldn't disclose, but he said the amount can increase depending on the length of employment and quality of service.

“Usually we try to do something for everyone and then on top of that the merit pay,” Grijalva said.

Grijalva said that employees would receive the minimum bonus this year because a large portion of his budget was allocated to travel expenses and upgrades to office electronics.

Amy Emerick, Grijalva's chief of staff, sent an e-mail disputing the term “bonus”: “Our office issues merit pay, based on performance, which is added to a staffer's base salary and usually paid in Q4.”

### **Rep. Jeff Flake: \$36,000**

Flake advocates against excessive federal spending and spotlights an “Egregious Earmark of the Week” on his Web site to highlight pork-barrel projects. Chief of Staff Matthew Specht said there's no

inconsistency between that stance and giving bonuses, adding that Flake plans to give bonuses for 2009.

In an e-mail, Specht said Flake's "management of his office budget is consistent with his fiscal conservatism," noting that Flake returns about 20 percent of his office budget each year to the treasury. Records show that Flake returned that percentage in 2008, while a typical member of Congress returns less than 10 percent, according to the National Taxpayers Union.

That group rated Flake best among all 435 members of the House of Representatives for voting on fiscal policies that benefit taxpayers. Pete Sepp, its vice president of policy and communications, said giving bonuses isn't a concern on its own.

"We would view it in terms of the whole allowance rather than the payroll, and it would seem that Congressman Flake has made a decision of where to put the resources he has," Sepp said.

Specht said Flake's office budgets for bonuses and bases the individual amounts on quality of service. Asked to confirm Cronkite News Service's totals, Specht directed a reporter to LegiStorm.com.

### **Rep. Harry Mitchell: \$38,000**

Adam Bozzi, communications director, said Mitchell's office budgets for bonuses and bases amounts on performance evaluations.

According to numbers provided by his office and confirmed in federal records, Mitchell has returned an average of 12.8 percent of his allocation since 2007.

Bozzi noted that Mitchell has sponsored legislation to block automatic annual pay raises for members of Congress and that his concerns contributed to a freeze on raises for 2010.

"He believes that in these tough times Congress needs to watch its spending and lead by example," Bozzi said.

He said that “as a matter of discretion” Mitchell’s office wouldn’t comment on individual staff members’ compensation.

**Rep. Trent Franks: \$22,000**

Press Secretary Bethany Haley provided this statement from Franks in an e-mail:

“The information reflected in your payroll data analysis is indeed reflective of fourth quarter staff bonuses – congruent with the longstanding patterns of many Congressional offices. At times, this bump may not be reflected until the first quarter of the following year, but nevertheless the reason is the same.”

Franks’ office didn’t respond to follow-up questions sent via e-mail.

**Rep. John Shadegg: \$24,000**

Nicole Philbin, communications director, provided this statement from Shadegg in an e-mail: “Congressman Shadegg awards modest annual performance bonuses to employees for their dedication and hard work.”

The office provided no further comment, despite interview requests and follow up questions sent via e-mail.

**Rep. Ed Pastor: \$13,500**

Pastor, the only representative to provide bonus totals for 2008, said in an interview he doesn’t budget for bonuses and that the appropriation is based on a staff member’s success during the year. As of November, Pastor said he was undecided about bonuses for 2009.

“I’ll make a decision, but obviously we’re looking at how much money we will have and look at how much that will cost the budget, then we will have a better idea and make a determination,” Pastor said.

Elisa de la Vara, Pastor’s district director, said that she is asked to budget for a double digital return to the treasury at the end of the year. In 2008, Pastor’s office returned around 10 percent of its allocation.

### **Rep. Gabrielle Giffords: No Bonuses**

While Giffords' office didn't give bonuses in 2008 and showed no evidence of bonuses in 2007, her first year, Chief of Staff Maura Policelli didn't rule out ever giving bonuses.

"We absolutely might. It's absolutely based on circumstances," Policelli said.

### **Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick: Took Office in 2009**

An e-mailed statement attributed to Chief of Staff Michael Frias said that Kirkpatrick's office likely would award bonuses for 2009, though a final decision hadn't been made as of November.

"We are still discussing the issue, as this is the first time our office has had to deal with this question," the statement said.