



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on May 25, 2012

## Congress Questions HHS' ObamaCare Public-Relations Campaign

The Obama administration has come under fire after the Health and Human Services Department (HHS) hired a public relations firm to help restore the muddied reputation of the President's controversial Affordable Care Act. The \$20-million, taxpayer-funded contract was awarded to a PR firm called Porter Novelli, which helped launch the Agriculture Department's renowned healthy food pyramid.



The initiative, which was mandated by the ObamaCare law, is designed to “inform the American people about the many preventive benefits now available to those with Medicare, Medicaid, and private health insurance as a result of the Affordable Care Act,” an HHS official [stated](#). In effect, HHS officials will underscore an array of purported benefits that ObamaCare provides, such as “free” preventive services that require no co-pays or deductibles. *The Washington Times* [detailed](#) other marketing campaigns the Obama administration has launched to bolster the President's controversial law:

The HHS ad blitz is part of a larger effort. Last year, the administration spent more than \$1 million sending out postcards to small-business owners regarding Obamacare's small-business tax credit, as only about 5 percent of those eligible are using it. Mr. Obama paid Ogilvy Public Relations \$26 million in stimulus funds to spin his health care law, \$18 million of which was used to create a “publicity center.”

HHS spent \$19 million in 2010 to send out 40 million glossy brochures to Medicare beneficiaries about the health care law, parts of which the General Accounting Office conceded contained “overstatements” of the benefits and “a positive view... that is not universally shared.”

In 2010, the White House spent \$3.6 million on TV ads featuring actor Andy Griffith claiming Medicare benefits would “stay the same” under the new law. The ad is misleading because 1 in 4 seniors in Medicare Advantage will have benefits cut. These are only the Obamacare PR campaigns that have leaked out, after the money was spent.

However, as *The New American* recently [reported](#), critics are saying the administration's latest PR thrust is nothing more than an election tool for Obama's reelection campaign. Consequently, congressional lawmakers are questioning the HHS' motives in “educating” the public on a law that has become increasingly unpopular — not to mention the fact that the initiative is being launched right in the heart of an election year.

Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio), for example, wrote a letter to HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius requesting specific details about how the PR funding will be allocated. “If you're trying to educate the public as to how to comply with a specific law, there might be a purpose in it,” Portman [said](#) in an interview with Fox News. “If, on the other hand, you're doing a PR blitz to try to sell a program during an election year, that seems to me to be more in the realm of something a political organization should be paying for rather than us as taxpayers.”



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In an effort to prevent frivolous government spending on public relations and advertising contracts, in late February Mr. Portman and Sen. Clair McCaskill (D-Mo.) submitted [information requests](#) to 11 federal agencies asking for contracts that disclose the acquisition of publicity, communications, advertising, public relations, and other services dating back to October 1, 2008. Roll Call [reported](#) on the information requests:

McCaskill and Portman are seeking detailed information on the contracts, including contract numbers, dates of the awards, names of the contractors or any subcontractors, the types of competition, the costs of the contracts, a “brief description of the contract scope and the work performed” and the agency policies or projects supported by the contract.

The information requests were sent to the heads of the Housing and Urban Development, Energy, Justice, Health and Human Services, Defense, Labor, and Agriculture departments, as well as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Consumer Product Safety Commission, Environmental Protection Agency and the National Labor Relations Board.

“Over the past three years, we’ve seen accounts of wasteful federal spending on PR contracts to defend the administration’s unpopular policies,” a Portman aid [said](#) at the time of the submissions. “This investigation will further probe this administration’s use of taxpayer-funded spin.” Of course, the HHS was one agency that did not comply with the senators’ requests.

Another congressional member, Rep. Charles Boustany (R-La.), wrote the HHS Secretary on Tuesday demanding that she disclose all information on contracts for polling, message testing, public relations, and advertisements since 2008. If Ms. Sebelius does not respond by June 1, Boustany said he will subpoena the information.

“We want a full accounting because some of this seems to me to venture into the political arena, which would mean it’s more about Obama’s reelection than sharing of public information,” Mr. Boustany [told](#) the *The Washington Times*. “The administration is desperate to salvage Obamacare because it realizes it’s a political liability.”

Indeed, ObamaCare has become largely unpopular, and, as some critics suggest, the law could be the catalyst to Obama’s presidential demise in November. According to a recent [Rasmussen poll](#), the majority of American voters support repeal of the healthcare law: “[Fifty-six percent] of Likely U.S. Voters at least somewhat favor repeal of the health care law, while 37% are at least somewhat opposed,” Rasmussen noted. “This includes 46% who Strongly Favor repeal of the measure versus 26% who Strongly Oppose it.”

Tom Schatz, president of Citizens Against Government Waste, suggests that the timing of the \$20-million PR blitz is all too convenient, and will inevitably add to the already mounting pile of taxpayer waste. “If part of the health care law is found to be unconstitutional, and it’s something that they’re advertising, then it’s been a big waste of money,” he affirmed. “The real purpose of this seems to be to promote the president’s achievement with the health care law in the hope that this might assist in his reelection.”

Related article: [HHS Signs \\$20M Public-Relations Contract to Bolster ObamaCare](#)

Photo: Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio) (shown above questioning U.S. Secret Service Director Mark Sullivan and the Department of Homeland Security’s acting Inspector General Charles K. Edwards on May 23, 2012) wrote a letter to HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius requesting specific details about how the PR funding will be allocated: AP Images



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