

How Porter's office helped one company land contract

By JERRY WALLIS
STAFF WRITER

Part of the job of any state or federal lawmaker is helping constituents untangle themselves from the seemingly endless red tape generated by government bureaucracies.

In the case of Mary Anne Jackson, president and founder of the Deerfield-based My Own Meals, it was the U.S. military's special brand of red tape that led her company to turn for help to U.S. Rep. John Porter and his supervisor of constituent services, Margaret Schlickman.

The result, after years of effort, was that the company signed a contract in June with the U.S. Department of Defense.

It all started during Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf,

Jackson said, when military chaplains realized the need for special field rations to meet the religious dietary restrictions of some soldiers.

After Desert Storm, her company began producing such meals commercially, Jackson said, and some military chaplains bought them directly from My Own Meals.

My Own Meals eventually developed kosher rations for Jewish military personnel and halal rations for the military's Muslims, Schlickman said, but the brass was less than excited.

"It's something that the Defense Department had never addressed," she explained. "They had no special meals."

Instead of MREs (Meals Ready to Eat), the standard field rations, the military often had to supply fresh

food to personnel on restricted diets, Jackson said. Only a small percentage of military personnel required the special rations, she said, which helped keep the brass from considering them a priority.

But the gears of the military machine were turning. In 1991, Jackson said, My Own Meals received an unfunded five-year contract from the Defense Department to develop the special MREs.

According to Schlickman, the company spent a good deal of its own money developing the rations and trying to get them certified by the military.

Porter's office became involved in 1993, Jackson said, and the congressman himself became an advocate of the idea of the special MREs, regardless of their manufacturer.

"Congressman Porter was committed to making sure that these rations got in place," she said.

In 1995, Jackson said, the military turned over the meals developed by Jackson's firm to two other companies, which were forced to copy them. The military was protecting certain companies, she said, in order to make sure it could get rations from them when they were needed.

"It came down to the Defense Department really not wanting to purchase a commercial product," Schlickman said of the military's reluctance to deal with My Own Meals.

Finally, though, My Own Meals was allowed to bid on producing the special rations for the military, which led to the company being awarded the contract.

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In addition to being the first kosher, first halal and first commercial rations in the history of the military, Jackson said. "It's the first ration that's demand-driven."

That means the rations will be ordered by the military as needed instead of being stockpiled, she said.

"We ship it anywhere in the world."

It was important to her and My Own Meals to have Porter and his staff, especially Schlickman, in their corner, Jackson said.

"They never gave up," she said.

Schlickman said she was glad to be of service. She said her experience with My Own Meals was one of her last successes before her recent retirement.

"It was very satisfying to see this little company finally recognized," she said.

"The company itself gets full credit for its successful bid, Porter said.

"It was through the efforts of our office that they were created fairly and were able to bid on it," he said.

The saga of My Own Meals is just one example of how

constituents. Local residents seeking help from their representatives when dealing with the federal or state government should call the following lawmakers' offices:

■ U.S. Sen. Paul Simon at (312) 353-4952.

■ U.S. Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun at (312) 353-5420.

■ U.S. Rep. John Porter (10th Congressional District) at (847) 392-0303.

■ U.S. Rep. Philip Crane (8th Congressional District) at (847) 394-0790.

■ State Sen. William Peterson (28th District) at (847) 634-6060.

■ State Sen. Peter Fitzgerald (27th District) at (847) 934-1992.

■ State Sen. Martin Butler (28th District) at (847) 299-5646.

■ State Rep. Verna Clayton (31st District) at (847) 520-3555.

■ State Rep. Terry Parke (53rd District) at (847) 882-0070.

■ State Rep. Bernard Pedersen (54th District) at (847) 358-0539.

■ State Rep. Carolyn Krause (50th District) at (847)

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Cutting the red tape

By JERRY WALLIS
STAFF WRITER

Now that she's no longer watching over the interests of Porter's constituents, Margaret Schlickman is looking forward to perhaps watching over some birds instead.

Schlickman, 66, said she might take up bird watching now that she's retired after 16 years on Porter's staff, including 15 as the congressman's supervisor of constituent services.

But Schlickman's involvement with the world of politics predates her association with Porter by several decades.

Before going to work for Porter, for instance, the 40-year resident of Arlington Heights and mother of four spent two years as the receptionist in the Chicago office of then-U.S. Sen. Charles Percy.

Schlickman said and her former husband, Gene, from whom she is now divorced and who served a number of terms as a member of the Illinois House, were active Republicans during the unsuccessful 1960 presidential campaign of Richard Nixon.

"I was always kind of interested in politics," she recalled, "and I was sort of drawn into the Republican Woman's Club and, later on, the organization. We both were."

"I kid people that I've grown old in politics," Schlickman said. "I started with very young children, and they're all married and



Margaret Schlickman, who recently retired as U.S. Rep. John Porter's head of constituent services, goes through the files in Porter's Arlington Heights office with intern Jarrod Frahm.

have their own children now."

Schlickman went to work for Porter in the spring of 1980, shortly after the congressman was elected to fill the seat vacated by Ahner Mikva, who had been appointed as a federal judge.

She first opened an office for Porter in Des Plaines, then moved to Porter's Evanston office and became his supervisor of constituent services.

To help his constituents navigate the bureaucratic maze of the federal government, Porter now has a staff of eight, including five case workers, in his three

local offices, which are located in Arlington Heights, Deerfield and Waukegan. They assist more than 2,000 residents of the 10th Congressional District every year.

"They're all important," Porter said of the constituent services provided by his staff. "We have prided ourselves on having the best of any congressional staff in the country."

For her part, Schlickman was primarily responsible for general business matters and cases involving the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Small Business

Administration.

As an example of her duties, Schlickman cited the case of a local businessman who was being pressured by the Internal Revenue Service, which was threatening to put a lien on his bank account.

"The dispute was over whether or not he had paid a certain amount of money that was owed from the business," she said.

Computer problems prevented the IRS from being able to verify his proof, a canceled check.

"So (the IRS) wanted him to pay that money again," Schlickman said.

However, she said, "He didn't feel he could do that. It was rather a large check."

With the threat of potential bankruptcy hanging over the businessman's head, Schlickman went to the IRS.

"We kind of worked our way up through the network until we found someone who would listen."

As a result, she said, "They put a hold on the lien. They didn't do it."

Then came an ironic twist to the businessman's story, Schlickman said.

"In the end, when the computers came up and everything got settled, the IRS owed this company. It was just the opposite. They owed him some money back."

Not all constituents' problems are solved so quickly. Schlickman sometimes found it frustrating to help people with problems involving housing.

"Subsidized housing is really at a premium now,"

she said. "The waiting lists run from three to seven years for subsidized housing for senior citizens and for families."

She would sometimes make referrals to local agencies such as the Lake County Housing Authority, Schlickman said. But when people need housing in an emergency situation, she said, "there's not a lot I can do for people."

The job also had its rewards, Schlickman said, including the ability to make decisions.

"I think that's one of the best things about our job. I read a book a few years ago, and it said that the best jobs are judgment jobs," she said. "John trusts us to do that."

"Through the years, each of us has developed a Rolodex full of excellent contacts deep within the system," Schlickman said of the members of Porter's staff. "I have to emphasize we don't pressure, we try never to pressure the agencies. But we're sort of persistent. If we believe that this constituent, in any instance, has a good case, then we're persistent."

Porter himself is kept informed of their activities back home via monthly reports from his staff members, Schlickman said. And he also hears from them when they need him to make a call or take some other action in Washington on behalf of a constituent.

Even when the office is unable to solve a constituent's problem, Schlickman said, "They're happy that someone else reviewed it and they're happy (Continued on page 13)

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that we listened to them. That's probably one of our big jobs, listening to people."

Doing much of that listening from now on will be Mary Beth Hartmann, who joined Porter's office at the beginning of June.

Hartmann, who was previously employed by the village of Glenview, replaced Schlickman after learning the ropes from her during Schlickman's final days on the job.

"Margaret's training me to the hilt," she said at the beginning of Schlickman's last week in Porter's Arlington Heights office.

Although she is not

other activities, including the Arlington Heights Housing Commission, the Wheeling Township Human Services Committee and Hope Now, the township's resource center for the homeless.

And, said Schlickman, who recently returned from an Alaskan cruise, "I love to travel." She plans future visits with her daughter in New Jersey and friends in California.

Leaving Porter's office isn't easy, Schlickman said.

"It's kind of a bittersweet time for me. I'm going to miss the camaraderie and the information. It feels like

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