



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20463

January 27, 2022

## ADVISORY OPINION 2021-13

Matthew P. Hoh  
339 E. Pine Ave.  
Wake Forest, NC 27587

Dear Mr. Hoh:

We are responding to your request for an advisory opinion asking whether the Federal Election Campaign Act, 52 U.S.C. §§ 30101-45 (the “Act”), and Commission regulations recognize your government-provided disability benefits as “earned income” for purposes of receiving a candidate salary from your principal campaign committee. The Commission concludes that your disability benefits do not constitute “earned income” and, therefore, cannot be used to calculate the amount of any candidate salary that you may receive under 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g)(1)(i)(I) (the “candidate salary regulation”).

### ***Background***

The facts presented in this advisory opinion are based on your letter received on October 27, 2021, and your email received on November 12, 2021.<sup>1</sup>

You are a Marine Corps combat veteran who has been classified as “100% disabled” by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (“VA”).<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, you have received non-taxable VA disability benefits for the past several years. Although “being classified as 100% disabled by the VA does not limit other income or employment,” due to your disability you were “unable to earn any money” for most of five years beginning in 2015.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, however, you earned approximately \$5,000 in taxable income as

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<sup>1</sup> Advisory Opinion Request (“AOR”).

<sup>2</sup> AOR001.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*; AOR003.

compensation for employment. You anticipate earning approximately \$8,000 in taxable income from employment in 2021.<sup>4</sup>

You intend to run for the United States Senate in the 2022 election cycle.<sup>5</sup> You state that your candidacy will have no impact on your VA disability benefits, and you expect to continue to receive these benefits during your campaign.<sup>6</sup> You are interested in also receiving a candidate salary from your principal campaign committee once you become eligible under Commission regulations. You are “not interested in receiving a candidate salary greater than \$1,000-\$2,000 a month” from campaign funds, which would be less than you expect to receive in VA disability benefits.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Question Presented***

*Do your VA disability benefits constitute “earned income” for purposes of the Commission’s candidate salary regulation?*

### ***Legal Analysis and Conclusion***

No, your VA disability benefits do not constitute “earned income” for purposes of the candidate salary regulation. Accordingly, they cannot be used to calculate the maximum amount of candidate salary that you may receive from your principal campaign committee.<sup>8</sup>

The Act and Commission regulations prohibit any person from converting campaign funds to “personal use.”<sup>9</sup> “Personal use” is defined as the use of campaign funds “to fulfill any commitment, obligation, or expense of a person that would exist irrespective of the candidate’s election campaign or individual’s duties as a holder of Federal office.”<sup>10</sup> The Act and Commission regulations provide a non-exhaustive list of

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<sup>4</sup> AOR003.

<sup>5</sup> See Matthew Hoh for Senate, FEC Form 1 (Sept. 23, 2021), <https://docquery.fec.gov/pdf/247/202109239466978247/202109239466978247.pdf>; Matthew Patrick Hoh, Statement of Candidacy, FEC Form 2 (Sept. 9, 2021), <https://docquery.fec.gov/pdf/817/202109099466636817/202109099466636817.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> AOR003.

<sup>7</sup> AOR001.

<sup>8</sup> A rulemaking petition to amend the candidate salary regulation is currently pending before the Commission. For the most recent updates on this rulemaking petition, visit <https://sers.fec.gov/fosers/>, reference REG 2021-01 (Candidate Salaries).

<sup>9</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 30114(b)(1); 11 C.F.R. § 113.2(e).

<sup>10</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 30114(b)(2); *see also* 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g).

expenses that, when paid using campaign funds, constitute *per se* conversion of those funds to personal use.<sup>11</sup>

Under Commission regulations, salary payments by a candidate’s principal campaign committee to the candidate are *per se* personal use unless specific requirements are met.<sup>12</sup> One of these requirements is that candidate salary payments must not exceed “the lesser of: the minimum salary paid to a Federal officeholder holding the office that the candidate seeks; or the earned income that the candidate received during the year prior to becoming a candidate.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, a candidate’s “earned income” in the year prior to becoming a candidate determines (1) whether the candidate’s principal campaign committee may use campaign funds to pay the candidate a salary (because if the prior year’s earned income is zero dollars, then the maximum amount of campaign funds that could be used to pay the candidate a salary would also be zero dollars), and (2) the maximum amount of candidate salary that the committee may pay (if the prior year’s earned income is less than the minimum salary paid to a person holding the federal office the candidate seeks). Candidates receiving a salary from campaign funds must provide “income tax records from the relevant years and other evidence of earned income” to the Commission upon request.<sup>14</sup>

The Act and Commission regulations do not define the term “earned income.” As explained below, however, interpreting the term to include VA disability benefits would be inconsistent with the use of the term in the Act and Commission regulations, its commonly understood meaning, and the purposes of the candidate salary regulation.

*A. Use of “earned income” under the Act and Commission regulations.*

In defining “personal funds,” the Act lists “earned income” along with “salary” as income derived from employment,<sup>15</sup> and as distinct from more passive forms of income resulting from dividends, bequests, trusts, personal gifts, stock sales, and lottery

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<sup>11</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 30114(b)(2); 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g)(1)(i).

<sup>12</sup> 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g)(1)(i)(I).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* The candidate salary regulation also imposes the following requirements: (1) The salary must be paid from the candidate’s principal campaign committee funds; (2) any income that the candidate earns from any other source must be counted against the minimum annual salary for the office the candidate seeks; (3) salary payments must be computed on a pro rata basis; (4) the salary must not be paid before the date of the filing deadline for access to the primary election for the office the candidate seeks (or January 1<sup>st</sup> of each even-numbered year in states that do not conduct primaries); and (5) salary payments must cease when the recipient is no longer a candidate for public office (*i.e.*, the candidate loses the primary or general election or otherwise withdraws from the race).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> “The term ‘personal funds’ means an amount that is derived from . . . income received during the current election cycle of the candidate, including— a salary and other *earned income from bona fide employment.*” 52 U.S.C. § 30101(26)(B)(i) (emphasis added).

proceeds.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Commission regulations typically use the term “earned income” in the context of employment. For example, the regulatory definition of “personal funds” generally follows the definition in the Act by grouping “earned income that the candidate earns from *bona fide* employment” and “salary.”<sup>17</sup> Further, in determining the maximum salary that a principal campaign committee may pay to a candidate, the federal officeholder-salary calculation must be reduced by “[a]ny *earned income* that [the] candidate *receive[d] from salaries or wages* from any other source.”<sup>18</sup> These references to “earned income” in the Act and Commission regulations indicate that the term refers to compensation for services rendered in an employment context.

*B. Commonly understood meaning of “earned income.”*

Interpreting “earned income” as compensation paid in exchange for a person’s time and labor is also consistent with the term’s commonly understood meaning. For example, Black’s Law Dictionary defines “earned income” as a subset of “income” that includes “[m]oney derived from one’s own labor or active participation; earnings from services.”<sup>19</sup> Further, the Oxford English Dictionary describes “earned income” as “income derived from paid work, esp[ecially] as contrasted with [income] derived from property, interest payments, etc.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 30101(26)(B)(ii)-(vii); *see also* 11 C.F.R. § 100.33(b)(2)-(7).

<sup>17</sup> 11 C.F.R. § 100.33(b)(1) (emphasis added).

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* § 113.1(g)(1)(i)(I) (emphasis added). *See also id.* § 9003.2(c)(3)(ii) (defining “personal funds” to include “[s]alary and other earned income from *bona fide* employment” in regulations implementing Presidential Election Campaign Fund Act, 26 U.S.C. §§ 9001-12(emphasis added)); *id.* § 100.54(c) (referring to employee’s “earned leave time” in determining whether compensating employee who renders personal services without charge to political committee is contribution); *id.* § 9411.1(a)(3) (referring to “Limitations on Outside Earned Income, Employment and Affiliations for Certain Noncareer Employees”).

<sup>19</sup> *Income*, Black’s Law Dictionary (11th ed. 2019). *See also earned income*, Merriam-Webster Legal Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/legal/earned%20income> (last visited Nov. 17, 2021) (“income (as wages, salary, professional fees, or commissions) that results from the personal labor or services of an individual”).

<sup>20</sup> *Earned income*, Oxford English Dictionary Online, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/242656](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/242656) (last visited Nov. 22, 2021).

In addition, the treatment of VA benefits for other purposes is informative. The Internal Revenue Service (“IRS”) excludes VA benefits from “earned income.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, guidance from both the House and Senate Ethics Committees direct Members of Congress and congressional candidates to exclude government benefits such as VA disability benefits from earned income when filing their financial disclosure reports.<sup>22</sup>

*C. Purpose of the candidate salary regulation.*

Excluding VA disability benefits from “earned income” would also be consistent with the purpose of the candidate salary regulation. When the Commission amended its regulations to permit the use of campaign funds to pay candidate salaries in 2002, it reasoned that “the payment of a salary to a candidate is not a prohibited personal use . . . since, but for the candidacy, the candidate would be paid a *salary in exchange for services rendered to an employer.*”<sup>23</sup> This comports with the stated objective of the candidate salary regulation: “to compensate candidates for lost income that is foregone due to becoming a candidate.”<sup>24</sup> You have stated that your VA disability benefits, by contrast, are not tied to salary and will continue to be paid throughout your campaign.<sup>25</sup> Nothing in the history of the candidate salary regulation suggests that the Commission intended to include a government benefit with no connection to current employment, which will be conferred without regard to a candidate’s campaign, within the scope of “earned income.”

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<sup>21</sup> “Earned income” is defined in the Internal Revenue Code as “wages, salaries, tips, and other employee compensation, but only if such amounts are includible in gross income for the taxable year.” 26 U.S.C. § 32(c)(2). IRS guidance states that “veterans’ benefits paid under any law, regulation, or administrative practice administered by the [VA]” should not be included as income for federal tax purposes. See Internal Revenue Service, Pub. 525, Taxable and Nontaxable Income at 16 (Apr. 6, 2021), <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p525.pdf>; see also *id.* at 18 (Military and Government Disability Pensions). The IRS provided the same guidance in 2002 when the candidate salary regulation was promulgated. Internal Revenue Service, Pub. 525, Taxable and Nontaxable Income at 12 (2002), <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-prior/p525--2002.pdf>. The Act requires the Commission and the IRS to work together to promulgate “mutually consistent” regulations. 52 U.S.C. § 30111(f). Excluding VA disability benefits from the definition of “earned income” would thus be consistent with the term’s commonly understood meaning and the manner in which the IRS appears to characterize these benefits for its purposes.

<sup>22</sup> See U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ethics, Instruction Guide: Financial Disclosure Statements and Periodic Transaction Reports at 30 (2020), <https://ethics.house.gov/sites/ethics.house.gov/files/documents/CY%202020%20Instruction%20Guide%20for%20Financial%20Disclosure%20Statements%20and%20PTRs.pdf>; U.S. Senate Select Committee on Ethics, Financial Disclosure Instructions for Calendar Year 2020 at 13 (Feb. 2021), [https://www.ethics.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/1d1f7bc9-14f1-404d-ae6d-ba83395e651b/cy-2020-financial-disclosure-instructions-with-cover--final.pdf](https://www.ethics.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/1d1f7bc9-14f1-404d-ae6d-ba83395e651b/cy-2020-financial-disclosure-instructions-with-cover--final.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Disclaimers, Fraudulent Solicitations, Civil Penalties, and Personal Use of Campaign Funds, 67 Fed. Reg. 76,962, 76,972 (Dec. 13, 2002) (emphasis added).

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> AOR003.

In sum, construing the term “earned income” as excluding your VA disability benefits for purposes of the candidate salary regulation would be consistent with the use of the term in the Act and Commission regulations, its commonly understood meaning, and the purposes of the regulation. Consequently, the Commission concludes that VA disability benefits are not “earned income” under 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g)(1)(i)(I) and may not be used to calculate any salary that you may receive from campaign funds.

This response constitutes an advisory opinion concerning the application of the Act and Commission regulations to the specific transaction or activity set forth in your request.<sup>26</sup> The Commission emphasizes that, if there is a change in any of the facts or assumptions presented, and such facts or assumptions are material to a conclusion presented in this advisory opinion, then the requestor may not rely on that conclusion as support for its proposed activity. Any person involved in any specific transaction or activity which is indistinguishable in all its material aspects from the transaction or activity with respect to which this advisory opinion is rendered may rely on this advisory opinion.<sup>27</sup> Please note that the analysis or conclusions in this advisory opinion may be affected by subsequent developments in the law including, but not limited to, statutes, regulations, advisory opinions, and case law. Any advisory opinions cited herein are available on the Commission’s website.

On behalf of the Commission,



Allen J. Dickerson  
Chairman

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<sup>26</sup> See 52 U.S.C. § 30108.

<sup>27</sup> See *id.* § 30108(c)(1)(B).