



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION  
Washington, DC 20463

December 10, 2021

**BY ELECTRONIC MAIL ONLY**

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Lawrence H. Norton, Esq.  
Venable, LLP  
600 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20001

RE: MUR 7755  
LaForce & Company, LLC

Dear Mr. Norton:

On June 30, 2020, the Federal Election Commission notified your client, LaForce & Company, LLC, of a complaint alleging violations of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended.

Upon further review of the allegations contained in the complaint, and information provided by your client, the Commission, on December 2, 2021, voted to dismiss the complaint as to LaForce & Company, LLC. Accordingly, the Commission closed its file in this matter.

Documents related to the case will be placed on the public record within 30 days. *See Disclosure of Certain Documents in Enforcement and Other Matters*, 81 Fed. Reg. 50,702 (Aug. 2, 2016). The Factual and Legal Analysis, which explains the Commission's finding, is enclosed for your information.

If you have any questions, please contact Roy Q. Lockett, the attorney assigned to this matter, at (202) 694-1650.

Sincerely,

*Mark Allen*

Mark Allen  
Assistant General Counsel

Enclosure

**FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION**

**FACTUAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS**

RESPONDENTS: Cory Gardner MUR 7755  
 Cory Gardner for Senate and Lisa Lisker  
 in her official capacity as treasurer  
 Moët Hennessy USA, Inc., in lieu of Krug  
 Champagne (Maison Krug), LVMH  
 Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, Inc.  
 LaForce Company

**I. INTRODUCTION**

This matter was generated by a Complaint filed with the Federal Election Commission (the “Commission”).<sup>1</sup> The Complaint alleges that Senator Cory Gardner and Cory Gardner for Senate and Lisa Lisker in her official capacity as treasurer (“Gardner Committee”) violated the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended (the “Act”) and Commission regulations in connection with Gardner’s attendance at a “lavish” “invitation-only” event on February 26, 2020, which was hosted by Krug Champagne, a French company, at a Palm Beach, Florida mansion.<sup>2</sup> The Complaint asserts that the event does not appear to be campaign-related, and thus the Gardner Committee’s reported expense of \$350 for Gardner’s attendance constituted *per se* personal use of campaign funds.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, the Complaint contends that that if the event was campaign-related, the Gardner Committee would have violated the Act by accepting a corporate and possibly foreign national contribution from Krug Champagne, and Krug Champagne violated the Act by making contributions to the campaign.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the Complaint

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<sup>1</sup> See 52 U.S.C. § 30109(a)(1).

<sup>2</sup> Compl. at 1, 6-8 (June 29, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

1 alleges that in an apparent attempt to disguise the payment, the Gardner Committee reported the  
2 \$350 campaign expenditure to LaForce Company (“LaForce”), a public relations firm, rather  
3 than to Krug Champagne, the ultimate recipient, in violation of the Act’s reporting  
4 requirements.<sup>5</sup>

5 According to the joint response of Gardner and the Gardner Committee (“Gardner  
6 Respondents”), Gardner’s attendance at the event reflected *bona fide* campaign activity that the  
7 Committee could fund. Moët Hennessy USA, Inc. (“MH USA”), which responded to the  
8 Complaint “in lieu of” Krug Champagne, states that it made no contribution because the event in  
9 question was intended to promote brand awareness of Krug Champagne in the United States, and  
10 was not related to Gardner’s campaign.<sup>6</sup> MH USA and LaForce, the entities that planned and  
11 managed the event, also assert that no contributions were made because the event was not a  
12 fundraising event for Gardner and that Gardner did not make any formal statement or remarks at  
13 the event.

14 Based on the allegations of the Complaint, the Responses, and the other available  
15 information, the Commission: (1) dismisses the allegation that MH USA violated 52 U.S.C.  
16 §§ 30118(a) or 30121(a)(1) by making a prohibited in-kind contribution to Cory Gardner and the  
17 Gardner Committee; (2) dismisses the allegation that Gardner and the Gardner Committee  
18 violated 52 U.S.C. §§ 30118(a) or 30121(a)(2) by accepting a prohibited in-kind contribution  
19 from MH USA; (3) dismisses the Complaint as to LaForce Company; (4) dismisses the  
20 allegation that Gardner and the Gardner Committee violated 52 U.S.C. § 30114(b) by converting

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>6</sup> Response of MH USA (“MH USA Resp.”) at 1-2 (Aug. 20, 2020). The MH USA Response states that “[a]lthough the complaint made allegations as to Krug Champagne, MH USA was the organizer and financial sponsor of the event and therefore, is responding in lieu of Krug Champagne.” *Id.* at 1.

1 campaign funds to personal use; and (5) dismisses the allegation that the Gardner Committee  
2 violated 52 U.S.C. § 30104(b) by failing to adequately disclose the payee of certain  
3 disbursements.

## 4 **II. FACTUAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS**

### 5 **A. Factual Background**

6 Cory Gardner served as a U.S. Senator for Colorado and was a candidate for reelection in  
7 2020.<sup>7</sup> The Gardner Committee is Gardner’s principal campaign committee.<sup>8</sup>

8 According to the Gardner Respondents, Gardner traveled to Palm Beach, Florida on  
9 February 26, 2020, for meetings with campaign and party committee donors and supporters.<sup>9</sup>  
10 The Gardner Respondents state that at the conclusion of one of the campaign meetings, “a donor  
11 and political supporter invited Senator Gardner to attend the event in question as his guest.”<sup>10</sup>  
12 The Gardner Response notes that this event was not part of Gardner’s itinerary for travel to  
13 Florida, describing the candidate’s attendance as “spontaneous.”<sup>11</sup> Further, the Response asserts  
14 that Gardner did not solicit funds for his campaign at the event and the event was not structured  
15 by its hosts as a fundraising event for the candidate.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the Gardner Respondents  
16 maintain that Gardner’s attendance at the event reflected *bona fide* campaign activity, as the  
17 candidate’s “decision to attend the event was based on his desire to continue his campaign-

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<sup>7</sup> Gardner lost the 2020 general election on November 3, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Cory Gardner for Senate Amended Statement of Organization (Dec. 3, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Joint Response of Gardner and the Gardner Committee (“Gardner Resp.”) at 1 (Aug. 13, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Gardner Resp. at 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 3.

1 related discussions with the individual extending the invitation, and to continue meeting with  
 2 other supporters and potential supporters of his campaign at the event itself.”<sup>13</sup>

3 MH USA describes itself as an independently operated U.S.-based subsidiary of LVMH  
 4 Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton SE.<sup>14</sup> MH USA asserts that it purchases Krug Champagne from  
 5 MHCS, a French-based Krug affiliate, and then distributes the champagne to local distributors or  
 6 state run alcohol beverage control boards in the United States for profit.<sup>15</sup> MH USA describes  
 7 the event in question as one in a series of “brand awareness events to promote the Krug  
 8 champagnes it sells in the United States.”<sup>16</sup> LaForce’s Response to the Complaint states that it  
 9 acted as “Krug’s public relations firm” and notes that it “handles logistics for periodic events  
 10 intended to promote Krug’s products.”<sup>17</sup> LaForce maintains that the event at issue was planned  
 11 and executed consistent with other Krug promotional events.<sup>18</sup> For these events, LaForce asserts  
 12 that it typically identifies a host and arranges the activities therein, which includes food,  
 13 entertainment and press coverage.<sup>19</sup> LaForce “advances the event costs, which are then billed to  
 14 Krug following the event.”<sup>20</sup> LaForce further states that the host of the event has exclusive  
 15 control over the guests invited to the event and provides the guest list to LaForce to help

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<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>14</sup> MH USA Resp. at 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>17</sup> Response of LaForce (“LaForce Resp.”) at 1 (Aug. 17, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

1 “facilitate event logistics, such as seating arrangements and place cards.”<sup>21</sup> On the day of the  
 2 event at issue, the update of the guest list included Senator Gardner as an attendee.<sup>22</sup> Both the  
 3 LaForce Response and sworn affidavit of Brittney Marian, Vice President of LaForce, assert that  
 4 LaForce made no special arrangement for the Senator’s attendance, there was no announcement  
 5 at the event regarding the Senator’s attendance, and Gardner had no speaking role at the event.<sup>23</sup>  
 6 Marian, who was among the LaForce representatives at the event at issue, attests in her sworn  
 7 affidavit that she “was not aware of any campaign activity at the event, including any fundraising  
 8 requests made by or on behalf of Senator Gardner, or anyone advocating the election or defeat of  
 9 Senator Gardner or any candidate running against him.”<sup>24</sup>

10 MH USA’s Response to the Complaint similarly states that the event at issue was not a  
 11 fundraising event for Gardner. It states that Jamie Soriano, Brand Director at MH USA for Krug  
 12 Champagne products, “made opening remarks but did not mention Gardner’s presence, nor his  
 13 campaign or opponent.”<sup>25</sup> Soriano’s sworn affidavit, which is attached to MH USA’s Response,  
 14 is consistent with MH USA’s representations, stating that neither he nor any other MH USA  
 15 employee solicited, received, or transmitted any political contribution at the event, and that  
 16 Gardner did not make any formal statement or remarks at the event.<sup>26</sup> He also states that to his  
 17 knowledge, no other person made remarks regarding Senator Gardner or his campaign.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> LaForce Resp. at 2, Brittney Marian Aff. ¶ 4.

<sup>23</sup> LaForce Resp. at 2, Brittney Marian Aff. ¶¶ 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> LaForce Resp., Brittney Marian Aff. ¶ 5.

<sup>25</sup> MH USA Resp. at 2.

<sup>26</sup> MH USA Resp., Jamie Soriano Aff. ¶¶ 8-9.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*; ¶ 7.

Further, he notes that no campaign literature was passed out, no campaign staff members were present, and no posters or other campaign material were available or on display.<sup>28</sup>

The Gardner Committee disclosed paying LaForce \$350 for “food/beverage” on March 15, 2020.<sup>29</sup> Brittney Marian’s affidavit states that a representative of the Gardner Committee contacted LaForce after the February 26, 2020, event, “seeking to reimburse the cost per plate attributable to [Gardner’s] attendance, which LaForce advised was \$350.”<sup>30</sup> She further states the Gardner Committee “subsequently sent a check in the amount of \$350 to LaForce, which LaForce applied as a credit in billing Krug for the cost [of] the event.”<sup>31</sup>

## **B. Legal Analysis**

### **1. Allegation that MH USA Made a Prohibited Contribution to the Gardner Committee**

The Complaint contends that if the event was campaign-related, the Gardner Committee may have violated the Act by accepting a corporate and possibly foreign national contribution from Krug Champagne and Krug Champagne violated the Act by making contributions to the campaign.<sup>32</sup> The Act prohibits corporations from making contributions to federal candidates.<sup>33</sup> Further, no candidate or political committee may knowingly accept a corporate contribution.<sup>34</sup> The Act also prohibits foreign nationals from making, directly or indirectly, a contribution or

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<sup>28</sup> *Id.*; ¶ 9.

<sup>29</sup> Gardner Committee 2020 April Quarterly Report at 4320 (Apr. 15, 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Brittney Marian Aff. ¶ 6. The available information does not indicate that any of the attendees paid to participate in the event.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> Compl. at 2, 6.

<sup>33</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 30118(a); 11 C.F.R. § 114.2(b).

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

1 donation, or an express or implied promise to make a contribution or donation, in connection  
 2 with a federal, state, or local election.<sup>35</sup> And it prohibits any person from soliciting, accepting,  
 3 or receiving a contribution from a foreign national.<sup>36</sup> The Act provides that a “contribution”  
 4 includes “any gift, subscription, loan, advance, or deposit of money or anything of value made  
 5 by any person for the purpose of influencing any election for Federal office.”<sup>37</sup> “Anything of  
 6 value” includes all in-kind contributions.<sup>38</sup> An in-kind contribution includes the provision  
 7 without charge (or at less than the usual and normal charge) of any goods or services, including,  
 8 but not limited to, “facilities, equipment, supplies, personnel, advertising services, membership  
 9 lists, and mailing lists.”<sup>39</sup>

10 The Commission has long recognized that the payment of costs to sponsor public  
 11 appearances by candidates for Federal office that are “campaign-related” is considered made “for  
 12 the purpose of influencing Federal elections” and constitutes a “contribution on behalf  
 13 of such candidates, unless such payment is specifically exempted by the Act or regulation.”<sup>40</sup> To  
 14 determine whether the event is campaign-related, the Commission considers factors “including  
 15 the setting, timing, and statements or expressions of the purpose of an event and the substance of  
 16 the remarks or speech made.”<sup>41</sup> In particular, if an event included express advocacy on behalf of

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<sup>35</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 30121(a)(1)(A).

<sup>36</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 30121(a)(2).

<sup>37</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 30101(8)(A)(i).

<sup>38</sup> 11 C.F.R. § 100.52(d)(1).

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> See Advisory Op. 1988-22 (San Joaquin Valley Republican Associates) at 6 (a corporation’s payment of costs for a candidate’s public appearance was “campaign related” and, thus, presumptively constituted a “contribution” subject to corporate prohibition on contributions in connection with federal elections).

<sup>41</sup> Advisory Op. 1996-11 (National Right to Life Committee) at 4.



a candidate or against the candidate’s opponent, or if the candidate is soliciting contributions at the event, the Commission may conclude the event is campaign-related.<sup>42</sup> The provision of costs for campaign events or rallies for a federal candidate constitutes in-kind contributions.<sup>43</sup>

Here, the available information does not indicate that the event in question was campaign-related. The event represented one in a series of promotional events that was not focused on Gardner’s candidacy. Indeed, Brittney Marian of LaForce provided a sworn statement averring that there was no announcement at the event regarding the Senator’s attendance and Gardner had no speaking role at the event.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Jamie Soriano of MH USA states in his affidavit that his opening remarks at the event did not mention Gardner.<sup>45</sup> Further, there is no information that any fundraising activity on behalf of Gardner occurred. The Gardner Response maintains that the candidate did not solicit funds for his campaign at the event and the event was not structured by its hosts as a fundraising event for the candidate.<sup>46</sup> As the available information does not suggest that the event was campaign-related, no reasonable

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<sup>42</sup> See Advisory Op. 1986-37 (National Conservative Foundation) at 4 (public appearances by candidates at sponsored events will be campaign-related if such events include any express advocacy of the election or defeat of any candidate or the solicitation of contributions to any candidate or political committee, and that the absence of express advocacy or solicitations will not preclude a determination that public appearances by candidates are campaign-related); Advisory Op. 1994-15 (Byrne) at 2 (the Commission has determined that financing particular activities involving the participation of a Federal candidate will result in a contribution to or expenditure on behalf of a candidate if the activities involve (i) the solicitation, making or acceptance of contributions to the candidate’s campaign, or (ii) communications expressly advocating the nomination, election or defeat of any candidate, and that the absence of those factors will not preclude a determination that an activity is “campaign-related”).

<sup>43</sup> See Factual & Legal Analysis (“F&LA”) at 4, MUR 6857 (Jerry Gappens) (finding reason to believe that prohibited corporate resources were used to make an in-kind contribution in the form of payments of certain campaign event costs to Marilinda Garcia for Congress); F&LA at 2, 4, MUR 6447 (Steele for Maryland, Inc.) (finding reason to believe committee had accepted excessive in-kind contributions in the form of payments of certain campaign fundraising expenses); *accord Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1, 19 (1976) (per curiam) (noting that “Speeches and rallies generally necessitate hiring a hall and publicizing the event.”).

<sup>44</sup> LaForce Resp., Brittney Marian Aff. ¶¶ 4-5.

<sup>45</sup> MH USA Resp.; Jamie Soriano Aff. ¶ 7.

<sup>46</sup> Gardner Response at 3.

1 inference can be drawn to conclude that any contribution was made. Accordingly, the  
 2 Commission dismisses the allegation that Moët Hennessy USA, Inc. in lieu of Krug Champagne  
 3 (Maison Krug) violated 52 U.S.C. §§ 30118(a) or 30121(a)(1) by making a prohibited in-kind  
 4 contribution to Gardner and the Gardner Committee. Likewise, the Commission dismisses the  
 5 allegation that Cory Gardner and the Gardner Committee violated 52 U.S.C. §§ 30118(a) or  
 6 30121(a)(2) by accepting a prohibited in-kind contribution from Moët Hennessy USA, Inc. in  
 7 lieu of Krug Champagne (Maison Krug). For these same reasons, the Commission also  
 8 dismisses the Complaint as to LaForce Company.

## 9 2. Allegation that Gardner Converted Campaign Funds to Personal Use

10 The Complaint alleges, as an alternative argument, that the \$350 payment for Gardner's  
 11 attendance at the event was personal use. Under the Act, a contribution accepted by a candidate  
 12 may be used for, *inter alia*, "otherwise authorized expenditures in connection with the campaign  
 13 for Federal office of the candidate."<sup>47</sup> However, a contribution to a candidate shall not be  
 14 converted by any person to "personal use."<sup>48</sup> "Personal use" means any use of funds in a  
 15 campaign account of a present or former candidate to fulfill a commitment, obligation, or  
 16 expense of any person that would exist irrespective of the candidate's campaign or duties as a  
 17 Federal officeholder.<sup>49</sup> The Commission evaluates certain expenses, such as travel, meal, and  
 18 legal expenses, on a case-by-case basis by applying the "irrespective test" to determine whether a

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<sup>47</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 30114(a).

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* § 30114(b)(1).

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* § 30114(b)(2); 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g); Explanation and Justification for Expenditures; Reports by Political Committees; Personal Use of Campaign Funds, 60 Fed. Reg. 7,862, 7,863 (Feb. 9, 1995) ("Personal Use E&J").

1 personal use violation has occurred.<sup>50</sup> The Commission has long recognized that “candidates  
 2 have wide discretion over the use of campaign funds.”<sup>51</sup> If a candidate “can reasonably show  
 3 that the expenses at issue resulted from campaign or officeholder activities, the Commission will  
 4 not consider the use to be personal use.”<sup>52</sup>

5 Gardner asserts that his “decision to attend the event was based on his desire to continue  
 6 his campaign-related discussions [from earlier meetings with campaign and party committee  
 7 donors and supporters] with the individual extending the invitation, and to continue meeting with  
 8 other supporters and potential supporters of his campaign.”<sup>53</sup> There is no available information  
 9 that contradicts this explanation that Gardner’s attendance was for the purpose of continuing  
 10 campaign discussions, not personal use. Accordingly, the Commission dismisses the allegation  
 11 that Cory Gardner and the Gardner Committee violated 52 U.S.C. § 30114(b) by converting  
 12 campaign funds to personal use.

### 13 3. Allegation that the Gardner Committee Misreported the Ultimate Payee of 14 the LaForce Disbursement 15

16 The Complaint also alleges that the Gardner Committee has concealed the identity of the  
 17 ultimate recipient of the \$350 payment it made to LaForce, arguing that LaForce acted as a  
 18 conduit for the actual recipient of the funds, Krug Champagne.<sup>54</sup> The Act and Commission  
 19 regulations require political committees to report the name and address of each person to whom  
 20 they make expenditures or other disbursements aggregating more than \$200 per calendar year, or

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<sup>50</sup> See 11 C.F.R. § 113.1(g)(1)(ii).

<sup>51</sup> Personal Use E&J, 60 Fed. Reg. at 7,867.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

<sup>53</sup> Gardner Response at 2.

<sup>54</sup> Compl. at 7.

1 per election cycle for authorized committees, as well as the date, amount, and purpose of such  
 2 payments.<sup>55</sup> The relevant reporting requirements under the Act and Commission regulations are  
 3 intended to ensure public disclosure of “where political campaign money comes from and how it  
 4 is spent.”<sup>56</sup>

5 Neither the Act nor Commission regulations address the concepts of ultimate payees,  
 6 vendors, agents, contractors, or subcontractors in this context.<sup>57</sup> The Commission has, however,  
 7 found reason to believe that political committees violated the Act’s reporting requirements in  
 8 circumstances where the factual record suggests that a committee reported a vendor that served  
 9 merely as a stand-in for payments to another particular recipient the committee avoided  
 10 disclosing.<sup>58</sup>

11 It does not appear that the Gardner Committee failed to disclose the appropriate payee.  
 12 While MH USA is the entity that held the event, LaForce organized the logistics of the event,  
 13 incurred initial expenses, and was reimbursed for its payment of the costs involved. Before MH  
 14 USA reimbursed LaForce for advancing the costs of the event, the Gardner Committee sent a

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<sup>55</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 30104(b)(5), (6); 11 C.F.R. § 104.3(b)(3)(i), (ix) (political committees other than authorized committees); *id.* § 104.3(b)(4)(i), (vi) (authorized committees); *id.* § 104.9(a), (b) (all political committees).

<sup>56</sup> *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1, 66 (1976); *see also Citizens United v. FEC*, 558 U.S. 310, 369-71 (2010) (describing importance of disclosure requirements to serve informational interest, because “transparency enables the electorate to make informed decisions and give proper weight to different speakers and messages”).

<sup>57</sup> Advisory Op. 1983-25 (Mondale) at 2. The Commission has since addressed the requirements of section 30104(b)(5) in certain situations not applicable to these facts. *See* Reporting Ultimate Payees of Political Committee Disbursements, 78 Fed. Reg. 40,625, 40,626-27 (July 8, 2013) (“Ultimate Payee Interpretive Rule”) (clarifying committees’ obligation to report “ultimate payees” in three specific scenarios that are not vendor specific).

<sup>58</sup> *See* F&LA at 2-3, MUR 6724 (Bachmann for President) (Bachmann’s committee and Iowa state senator Kent Sorenson agreed that he would be paid by the committee in that matter through an intermediary —C&M— then simply added Sorenson’s monthly payments to the monthly fees it was already collecting from the committee); Conciliation Agreement at 2, MUR 6724 (Bachmann for President); Conciliation Agreement at 2-4, MUR 4872 (Jenkins) (respondents violated the Act by concealing its relationship with the actual vendor by routing payments to another vendor that had no involvement with the services provided by the actual payee).

1 check in the amount of \$350 to LaForce. Hence, the Gardner Committee's disclosure of the  
2 payment to LaForce appears facially accurate. The payment to LaForce also was reasonable  
3 since it did not bill MH USA for Gardner's participation, instead deducting that amount from the  
4 total bill that it ultimately charged MH USA for the cost of the event.<sup>59</sup> And the available  
5 information does not suggest that the Gardner Committee's payment to LaForce constituted a  
6 reported payment to a vendor that served as a stand-in for payments to another particular  
7 recipient the committee avoided disclosing. Accordingly, the Commission dismisses the  
8 allegation that the Gardner Committee violated 52 U.S.C. § 30104(b) by failing to adequately  
9 disclose the payee of its \$350 disbursement.

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<sup>59</sup> See LaForce Resp., Brittney Marian Aff. ¶ 6.