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Michelle Obama policy initiatives are a big deal for big business

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The latest Let's Move! event is brought to you by the letter K. As in K Street.

On Wednesday, first lady Michelle Obama will be joined by Sesame Street's Elmo and Rosita to unveil a new marketing effort aimed at making healthier foods more appealing to children.

Representatives from the Produce Marketing Association will be there too.

The first lady's two signature policy initiatives — the Let's Move! childhood obesity effort and the veteran-focused Joining Forces — have earned her bipartisan praise and buoyed her popularity among Americans. Those efforts have been developed in close cooperation with some of K Street and corporate America's biggest players that stand to benefit from exposure, public goodwill generated from being involved in a public health or charitable effort, or the policy itself.

Big lobbying forces and major industry groups like the American Beverage Association, the International Bottled Water Association, the Food Marketing Institute, the Grocery Manufacturers Association, the National Restaurant Association, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and many others have all worked closely with the East Wing on those initiatives, both of which heavily focus on private sector contributions.

Visitor records show produce association president Bryan Silbermann visited the White House on several occasions to meet with the first lady, Let's Move! executive director Sam Kass, former White House public engagement director Jon Carson and other top staffers.

The East Wing explains the involvement with corporate and lobbying interests on the grounds that those efforts were making a tangible difference nationwide. "We're proud that many companies that have answered the first lady's call to hire veterans and promote healthier foods for our nation's children and families," said Hannah August, a spokeswoman for the first lady's office.

But special interest access and influence peddling are exactly what President Barack Obama came to office vowing to curb.

“There is a disconnect between the rhetoric candidate Obama spouted and what Michelle Obama is doing,” said Michele Simon, a food policy consultant and author of “Appetite for Profit.” “What she’s doing is taking the place of policy. That’s problematic because it’s not a transparent, democratic process. It’s all closed-door meetings.”

The White House has banned registered lobbyists from serving on government boards or in the administration — though it has granted waivers to a number of prominent lobbyists. Meanwhile, the influence industry has managed to sidestep that by having people simply not registering as lobbyists, instead acting as “consultants” to avoid the rules and the stigma associated with lobbying.

And while White House staff were never forbidden from taking meetings with lobbyists, many choose to schedule them outside the White House to keep the meetings from showing up in public disclosure records.

“It’s another example of where the administration says that all lobbyists are bad and says that it won’t take their money, but on the other hand, basically opens the door to people it feels will benefit its political interests,” said Howard Marlowe, a lobbyist and former president of the advocacy group the American League of Lobbyists.

It’s a criticism echoed by nonpartisan government watchdogs who argue that the good intentions of both policy efforts are nevertheless a magnet for corporate industry groups seeking visibility, access or free publicity.

“This is a classic case of the game of influence peddling by lobbying associations,” said Craig Holman, who is a lobbyist with the watchdog group Public Citizen. “However noble the original intent of the first lady’s Joining Forces and Let’s Move! initiatives, lobbyists and corporations with business pending before the federal government invest in such charitable causes as a means to buy access and favor from the White House.”

The recent Drink Up initiative to encourage Americans to drink more water leaned heavily on the beverage industry and was promoted by the American Beverage Association and International Bottled Water Association.

The ABA represents hundreds of beverage companies — including giants like Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Nestlé and others with major stakes in the bottled water market. The ABA PAC is also a major player in political giving — spending more than \$200,000 in the 2012 cycle. According to the White House visitor logs, one of the group’s lobbyists, Susan Neely, visited the White House several times.

Other major brands with a financial stake in boosting bottled water sales all agreed to promote the effort. Aquafina, Evian, Nestlé Water, Poland Spring and many others helped promote the water campaign at a high-profile press event in Watertown, Wis., last month that featured the first lady and actress Eva Longoria, a Pepsi spokeswoman.

While some health experts view the water campaign as a stealth effort to reduce sugary beverage consumption without going negative, the companies involved simply agreed to add the Drink Up logo to packaging and marketing materials nationwide.

The initiative was launched with the Partnership for a Healthier America, the nonprofit founded to help carry out the Let's Move! mission by brokering private sector commitments, but in this case the Drink Up companies are not formal partners.

Usually, PHA partners sign a Memorandum of Understanding and PHA works with "unbiased third-party verifiers to report publicly every year on the progress our partners are making toward meeting their commitments," according to a partnership representative.

The water and nutrition policy events are far from the only East Wing-coordinated events that prominently feature corporations.

Nike and Reebok both sponsored back-to-school events focused on fitness. The website Epicurious partnered with the East Wing on a Kids State Dinner. Retail giant Walmart has been involved in healthy families and veterans initiatives.

The Walt Disney Co. and Nickelodeon have partnered on Let's Move! efforts and other nutrition and marketing issues. Supervalu, Walgreens and CVS have done events or policy rollouts with the first lady.

And the U.S. Chamber of Commerce — which spent millions to defeat the president's signature health care law — has teamed up with the first lady on a veterans' hiring initiative.

When it comes to food policy, the carrot-over-stick approach has irked some health advocates who hoped the Obama administration would play hardball with the food industry and go to bat for policies like limiting what foods can be marketed to young children.

But Washington's lack of appetite for sweeping federal policy to address childhood obesity is a big part of the reason Let's Move! has relied more on outside partnerships to move the ball forward, according to Margo Wootan, the director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Wootan strongly supports tougher nutrition regulation when it comes to things like menu labeling and trans fats, but she said she understands why the White House has pursued so many corporate deals as part of the campaign.

"They have relied on commitments a lot, but some of that is out of necessity," said Wootan.

Food marketing to children, the focus of Michelle Obama's announcement Wednesday, is a prime example. After a voluntary guidance drafted by an interagency working group was dropped under food

industry pressure last year, the first lady has doled out praise for industry self-regulation efforts and individual companies that are pledging to market healthier foods to children.

At the first-ever White House convening on food marketing to kids last month, Obama praised companies for making changes on their own and specifically pointed to the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, a voluntary self-regulation program composed of companies like Burger King, McDonald's, Kraft and General Mills.

"I want you to know that I will do everything in my power to celebrate and highlight this kind of leadership on behalf of our kids," she told an audience of food industry executives and public health advocates. "That's what I've been doing since I first started working on this issue, whether it was visiting a Walmart stocked with fresh produce, or having dinner at an Olive Garden with a healthier kids menu, or hanging out with Mickey to celebrate Disney's achievements on this issue. And I am eager to have these kinds of celebrations with every company in this room."

The Grocery Manufacturers Association lauds Mrs. Obama's willingness to work collaboratively with industry to promote healthier eating.

"We greatly respect the pragmatic approach she's had with all parties," said Louis Finkel, chief lobbyist for GMA. "We are making progress that, to be quite honest, is faster than what government could accomplish."