State senator's friends got $1M from Florida, but their firm fell short of goals

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(Photo: Steve Cannon, AP)

TALLAHASSEE — A business owned by friends of a state senator who helped them obtain $1 million in taxpayer money failed to meet initial goals outlined in a state contract but received full payment and is scheduled to receive another $1 million in next year's budget, records show.

State Sen. Aaron Bean helped Fernandina Beach-based Florida Psychological Associates receive $1 million hidden in the Florida State University College of Medicine budget after his friend who owns the business discussed ways the lawmaker could help promote and expand the project to other states, emails and records show.

Records from the Florida Department of state show the psychological evaluation business is owned by longtime Bean friends John and Catherine Drew.

The Drews billed FSU's medical school $590,193 from July to February after completing 6 percent of the screenings it had promised in exchange for the state money.

As of February, the project, which checks young people for early signs of mental illness, screened 241 schoolchildren. It should have completed 3,800, according to a copy of a contract Florida Psychological Associates CEO Catherine Drew signed with FSU.

Despite the performance, a questionnaire Drew completed for the Senate, to receive another $1 million in next year's budget, made no mention of delays.

"The directive of this project is for Florida State University College of Medicine through legislative appropriations to assist in the implementation and yearly expansion of an early identification system," Drew wrote in the questionnaire. "This project will identify those in need of mental health services — thereby providing significant cost savings to the state by increasing early identification related to untreated mental health conditions."

Through a Jacksonville marketing consultant, Drew declined to be interviewed about the project.

The benchmarks in the contract between FSU and Florida Psychological Associates were written to guarantee the project would conduct 7,100 screenings by July 2017.

Of those screenings, 4,500 would be schoolchildren and 2,600 would be criminal defendants in the court system.

But the first round of tests that should have begun in August did not start until December with the first schoolchildren. The screenings of defendants has not yet been approved by FSU, according to progress reports obtained from FSU.

Bean helped his friends obtain the $1 million in a secret appropriation process lawmakers use that hides payments in university budgets, sparing them from possible veto by the governor.

The Beans sought the $1 million state payment after Bean's initial request for $700,000 specifically identified as a line item in the Senate health care budget was slashed to $100,000 and then cut by the House.

The FSU medical school knew nothing about the $1 million until a House lawmaker added it at Bean's request, according to interviews and records obtained by the Naples Daily News.

The $1 million secret appropriation footing the bill on the Drews' mental health screening program is among $315 million in special projects slipped into university budgets by lawmakers over the past seven years, hidden within the state budget.

Because the projects are not actually written in language added to the state budget, there are no restrictions on how the money can be spent.

The project is overseen by Dr. Leslie M Beitsch, chairman of behavioral sciences and social medicine at FSU medical school.

He was not aware of the project until a university lobbyist alerted him of the extra cash in the school budget. He said he only supports the project because it could potentially improve how the state addresses mental illness.

"It's true that we didn't have anything to do with it until the money showed up," Beitsch said. "I'm willing to support it because this is something that could improve an area where our state is sorely behind everyone else."

Beitsch pointed out that Florida ranks near the very bottom among states in funded programs for adult and children’s mental health. And that any program with the potential to identify those at risk for mental health disorders or suicide is a “huge win for our state.”

“In short, without programs like this – ones that work— we are on the wrong end of the continuum of how mental health disorders should be identified and treated,” Beitsch said.

Catherine Drew received her doctorate degree in clinical psychology from FSU in 2013 and serves as a courtesy faculty member there.

About a year later she was appointed by Gov. Rick Scott to the state Board of Psychology, a position requiring confirmation by the Senate and one for which she thanked Bean in a Nov. 25, 2015, email "for your support and encouragement."

Beitsch said benchmarks in the contracts governing special projects like the $1 million for the Drews' firm serve as guidelines.

And invoices, like those submitted by Catherine Drew, often include short, vague, summaries accompanied by requests for payment. FSU could deny Drew's request for payment, but that rarely happens.

"If they were missing major parts of the contract, maybe we would consider issues with payment," he said. "But with the proper employees and equipment in place, I'm confident they'll start moving rather quickly."

Beitsch blamed the extensive delays Drew's project faced on a review process that becomes complicated when children are involved. He said the benchmarks were unrealistic.

"I never expected them to make it," he said.

Universities also stand to benefit from the secret legislative projects hidden in the state budget.

FSU collected $200,000 of Drew's program for administrative costs. The money covered a $120,550 salary for a full-time employee. The remaining amount was split between two employees who were assigned to the project on a part-time basis, according to data provided by FSU medical school spokesman Doug Carlson.

In a followup conversation, Carlson noted that the $200,000 in overhead costs helped fund the work of more than a dozen professionals, including accountants, a legal team, and contract oversight.

“Rather than carve the dollars up into dozens of allocations, the entire amount goes to the Center for Behavioral Health Integration at the College of Medicine and then it can be spent on functions which will further the mission of the center,” he said.

Carlson said the college has actually “absorbed costs” to execute the contract for this project, which he says “has merits” in identifying and treating mental illness in the state.

FSU could not provide specific details on how the Drews spent the money. Outside of invoices and monthly progress reports, the university had no specific information on how the money was spent.

Emails obtained from the Senate by the Daily News show Drew and her husband, Nassau County Tax Collector John Drew, planned to expand the program around the country and make a profit.

John Drew and Bean have been friends for more than a decade. Emails indicate Drew had asked Bean to draw up marketing material so he could promote the program in other states.

Bean has denied trying to make money from the screening project, part of which was to be completed with a web application the Drews named Celphie.

However, the application has been rife with problems and only began to function in January, said John Daigle, who developed Celphie.

"There were some bugs to be worked out, Daigle said.

It remains unclear what the Drews did with the money.

The invoices submitted for payment only mentioned hiring staff or purchasing tablets for the Celphie app. FSU had no record of employees who were hired for the project, or the quantity of or types of equipment they bought. A public records request for invoices yielded one FSU purchasing order for $100,000 in equipment and $700,000 for the project.

The Drews' business began submitting invoices to the medical school in July. Invoices show the firm billed the school for a $100,000 advance on July 11, 2016, to “secure licenses and purchase equipment.” The next invoice submitted Aug. 1 was to “secure additional licenses” for $22,243, invoices show.

Later on Aug. 20, the firm submitted a $52,453 invoice to engage with key school and court personnel, hire and train additional employees, testing and data collection. It submitted another $52,453 invoice on Sept. 20 itemizing the same tasks, the invoices show.

On Oct. 20, the firm submitted a $153,052 invoice, which included more engagement with key school and court personnel and preparing a quarterly report. It also indicated the purchase of “screeners.”

The firm’s Nov. 20 invoice to the FSU medical school for $52,453 offered no itemized list of any completed tasks. Subsequent monthly invoices up to Feb. 20, 2017, were identical.