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This mom just won the right to use campaign funds to pay for child care

Liuba Grechen Shirley is the first female candidate to get federal permission to use the funds for babysitting. The decision comes at a crucial time.

By Anna North | May 11, 2018, 7:40am EDT



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Liuba Grechen Shirley is a mother of two toddlers. She’s also running for Congress in New York’s Second District. And now she’s the first woman to get federal approval to use campaign funds for child care.

Grechen Shirley had asked the Federal Election Commission last month for permission to use the funds to pay for a babysitter for her 3-year-old daughter and 2-year-old son, **Mary Ann Georgantopoulos reports at BuzzFeed News**. Before running for office, she’d worked from home and provided full-time care for the children.

But, she wrote to the FEC, “as the primary election approaches, I expect to need full-time care for my children, along with additional support on evenings and weekends, so that I can devote the time necessary to run a successful campaign.” On Thursday, the FEC unanimously granted her request.

Grechen Shirley is not the first candidate of any gender to get FEC approval for child care expenses. In 1995, a male candidate was granted permission to use campaign funds for the purpose under more limited circumstances. But as the first woman to use FEC funds in this way, Grechen Shirley hopes to set an example for other moms who want to run for office — especially those who don’t necessarily have the deep pockets to pay for the needed extra child care themselves. And her move has extra significance as Sen. Tammy Duckworth and others are shining a spotlight on the need for Congress to be more inclusive of mothers.

The FEC decided Grechen Shirley’s child care expenses were “a direct result” of campaigning

The FEC bars candidates from using campaign funds for personal use, which **it defines as** any use whose purpose is “to fulfill a commitment, obligation or expense of any person that would exist irrespective of the candidate’s campaign or responsibilities as a federal officeholder.”

“More simply, if the expense would exist even in the absence of the candidacy or even if the officeholder were not in office, then the personal use ban applies,” the FEC’s website states.

In her **opinion in Grechen Shirley's case**, FEC Chair Caroline C. Hunter wrote that in 1995, the commission had granted a male candidate permission to spend campaign money on occasional babysitting services.

The candidate and his wife, “who was ‘an integral part’ of the candidate’s campaign team, traveled extensively within the candidate’s congressional district for campaign purposes, resulting in the need for ‘occasional’ childcare for the couple’s young child,” Hunter wrote. “The Commission concluded that it was permissible to use campaign funds to pay for such occasional childcare because such expenses, in that case, would be ‘incurred only as a direct result of campaign activity and would not otherwise exist.’” (Another male candidate later made a similar request, but the FEC did not have a quorum to issue an opinion, Hunter wrote.)

Grechen Shirley needs child care on a more ongoing basis — she currently pays her children’s babysitter \$22 an hour for about 20 hours of care per week, according to Georgantopoulos. But the same principle holds true as in the male candidate’s case, Hunter writes: “The Commission concludes that the childcare expenses described in your request, to the extent such expenses are incurred as a direct result of campaign activity, would not exist irrespective of your election campaign, and thus may be permissibly paid with campaign funds.”

It’s a key moment for mothers in Congress

The decision in Grechen Shirley’s case comes at a crucial time when women are **running for office in unprecedented numbers** (and, in many cases, **winning**) and other rules governing parents in Congress are beginning to change.

Twenty-four members of Congress had written a letter to the FEC in support of Grechen Shirley’s request, arguing that, “during an election cycle in which a record number of women are running for office, the Commission’s opinion on the use of campaign funds to pay for campaign-related childcare expenses will have nationwide ramifications.”

Hillary Clinton had weighed in as well, writing in a letter to the commission that “there is no reason to treat child care differently than any other campaign-related expense, nor is there any sound policy reason to differentiate child care costs from other necessary expenses of running for office.”

Clinton’s letter also noted that “the Commission has allowed candidates to use campaign funds to purchase copies of a candidate’s own book when the candidate did not earn royalties from the purchase, pay for legal fees incurred by a consultant, upgrade a Congressman’s home security system, and — significantly — to pay for the travel expenses of minor children when necessary to enable the parents’ participation in campaign or officially connected activities.”

Meanwhile, **Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) just became the first senator to give birth** while in office. She also championed a rule change to **allow babies on the Senate floor** so that she and future parents in the Senate don't have to miss votes while on parental leave. "If I have to vote and I'm breastfeeding my child, what do I do, leave her sitting outside?" **Duckworth asked in April**, before the rule change.

She no longer has to make that choice, and Grechen Shirley no longer has to choose between caring for her kids and running for Congress. Grechen Shirley hopes Thursday's decision will be an inspiration for other female candidates.

"There's a reason more than half of Congressmembers are millionaires: running for office takes a huge toll on a family's budget, especially while raising children," she said in a statement to BuzzFeed. "This groundbreaking decision will remove a major financial obstacle for working families and mothers at a time when women are increasingly considering elected office."

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