

California Assembly reports on lawmakers' spending misleads public

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

Assembly records show that Bob Blumenfield spent \$150,099 to run his office for the first eight months of this legislative year.

None of his colleagues, in fact, spent more than \$297,579, according to budget information Assembly leaders recently made public.

Yet the Woodland Hills Democrat actually spent more than three times that much, because salaries of some of his personal staff were charged to the budget committee he chairs, a Bee analysis shows. Spending reported for other members is similarly misleading.

The Assembly routinely underreports the amount of money used to run legislators' personal offices and overreports the operating costs of committees that do the brunt of the policy work in the house. The practice obscures how the lower house's \$146.7 million budget truly is spent at the Capitol and protects legislators from public criticism of their spending.

Chiefs of staff for 40 of 52 Democratic lawmakers, for example, do not count as a member expense in records released to the public.

More than 170 aides bankrolled by committees are not committee staff – they serve as personal office aides to the chairman or chairwoman, The Bee found.

The key issue is not accounting but transparency: Californians pay the tab but have no practical way of determining how much

each lawmaker spends to run his or her office.

“The Legislature and its leadership have perfected shell games to an art form,” said Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association.

Others say the Assembly’s practices are neither new nor unreasonable because duties tend to overlap between committees and legislative offices.

“You’re looking for black and white,” Assembly administrator Jon Waldie said of job duties. “Black and white doesn’t exist in this building.”

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