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CALIFORNIA

She directed $2.7M to her husband's company. The judge approved

California lawmakers created the Professional Fiduciaries Bureau to monitor self-dealing. Twenty years later, the bureau's inaction in one case shows how conflicts of interest can continue.

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March 3, 2026, 5:35 a.m. PT

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It was a successful year for Angelique Friend. The entrepreneur was at the pinnacle of her profession in Ventura County. State records show she was overseeing $20 million of her clients' assets and directing a sizable chunk of that money back into her own household.

As the 2022 holiday season approached, Friend celebrated in style and shared the snapshots on her company's Facebook page.

She smiled for a photo with Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner at a star-studded fundraiser. She stood in front of a white Christmas tree, adorned with white ornaments and bright white lights, shoulder-to-shoulder in matching sleepwear with Kathy Hilton as the socialite launched a holiday pajama line.

It was like a scene from "The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills." But Friend is not reality TV royalty. She made a name for herself in a less glamorous corner of

California: Ventura County Probate Court.

Deep within the drab courthouse across from Oxnard's agricultural fields, Friend is one of the county's main private fiduciaries, chosen frequently by a probate judge to handle the financial and personal interests of elderly people deemed too ill to care for themselves.

Friend operated a unique system. Besides being paid for her services, she often chose her husband, David Esquibias, to be her lawyer. Then, when her clients needed in-home support, she hired Townsgate In-Home Services to provide their care. Friend knew Townsgate well: Esquibias founded it the year they married.

Friend's elderly clients often footed the bill for all three services, at least until they could no longer afford or use in-home health care. Then, with the court's approval, Friend moved them to less-expensive care facilities and sold their homes, court records show. For years, Friend and Esquibias often disclosed their connections to the court, and Judge Roger Lund approved the payments, even though court rules and the California Professional Fiduciary Bureau's code of conduct generally prohibit such conflicts.

Court records show the couple brought in about $3 million from 2019 to 2025 from clients in the six cases CalMatters reviewed; $2.7 million went to Townsgate. Friend has other clients whose cases don't require public accounting in court and are not similarly reviewable by the public.

The arrangement was so brazen that court staffers whispered about it, and other attorneys found it troubling.

"Being able to have your own little referral source coming out of the court system. Wow. That should not be allowed," said Lisa MacCarley, a Los Angeles-area

probate attorney who was a prominent advocate for reform during Britney Spears's conservatorship battle.

Friend wouldn't agree to an interview for this story. Esquibias did not respond to CalMatters' questions involving Townsgate.

In a letter to CalMatters, Friend said that she fully complied with state laws that require her to disclose her connection to Townsgate, get court approval and make sure the services are in the best interest of her clients.

"I approach every conservatorship with heightened diligence, careful oversight, and full transparency," Friend wrote in her letter. "My work is designed to withstand scrutiny and ensure the highest standards of care, as consistently confirmed by the Court and the Bureau."

But state licensing records indicate she was more involved with Townsgate than she represented to the court. And CalMatters found at least two instances in which she did not disclose to the court that her husband owned Townsgate, at least three cases where Judge Lund called her out for hiring the company without prior court approval, and one case, records show, where she hired Townsgate months before the company was even licensed to provide in-home health care services.

By their nature, the cases that reach conservatorship are often complex and messy. Some people end up there because they've been taken advantage of by family, friends or previous caregivers. Others fight their children's attempts to make decisions for them, or have needs too great for their family members to bear. Some have no children and no one else to take care of them. So the court steps in.

With a judge's approval, conservators exert vast control over their clients' lives. They decide who provides them health care and where. They choose how their money is spent. They sell their clients' assets to pay bills. They can control visitation and communication with family members, setting up the potential for high-stakes and high-emotion confrontations and amplifying the importance of avoiding even the appearance of a conflict of interest.

The state agency created 20 years ago to monitor self-dealing in the industry, the Professional Fiduciaries Bureau, does not report taking any action against Friend for the conflicts.

California lawmakers formed the bureau after a Los Angeles Times investigation exposed self-dealing by conservators and a failure of judges to stop it. Friend's ability to send millions of dollars in business to her husband's company highlights how the system continues to rely on individual judges and, even with the bureau in place, conflicts of interest can continue for years with little consequence.

Part of the Department of Consumer Affairs, the bureau forbids real or perceived conflicts of interest explicitly in its rules, saying that fiduciaries must "not engage in any activity where there is the reasonable appearance of a conflict of interest … or reasonably could be perceived as self-serving."

Friend said she disclosed the connection to the bureau. "The Bureau has renewed my license every year without restriction and has never found that I violated fiduciary ethical standards or any governing law," Friend wrote.

When CalMatters requested Friend's reports from the bureau, it provided documents thick with black redaction lines. In 2023, the state Legislature significantly restricted what information the bureau can share with the public.

CalMatters attempted to speak with officials at the bureau for a year. However, they would only respond to emailed questions. The bureau spokesperson, Monica Vargas, declined to say whether Friend complied with its conflict-of-interest rules.

“The court is in a better position to ascertain the performance of the fiduciary and determine whether the various services are in the best interest of the conserved person,” Vargas wrote.

Separate from state regulations, California court rules forbid conflicts broadly, saying that a conservator “must not engage his or her family members to provide services to the conservatee for a profit or fee when other alternatives are reasonably available.” However, the rules allow judges to approve such arrangements if they determine that it’s in the best interest of the conservatee and it’s disclosed.

In tentative rulings, Judge Lund at times expressed concerns about Friend’s conflict of interest. However, those rulings are not final and only show what the judge is thinking. It’s unclear what happened in court because Ventura County stopped requiring transcripts for probate court in 2022.

Lund’s final court orders never mention Townsgate or demand that Friend stop using the company. All of the orders approved their payments. Without official transcripts, it's impossible to know whether or how Lund addressed the conflicts in court.

The court record doesn’t reflect any of the conservatees’ attorneys objecting to the conflict of interest.

One court transcript from 2022 obtained by CalMatters details what happened when one family challenged Friend's conflict. "The representation to the Court as I recall is that they … tend to price themselves at or slightly below the market to avoid any problems," Lund said. "And that is sufficient for the Court."

Lund and court leaders declined to comment for this story. Weeks after CalMatters sent court officials questions about the approvals, the presiding judge for Ventura County Superior Court announced that he was reassigning Lund, moving him to family court. The move came as a shock to many in the local legal community. In a February hearing, the new judge, Gilbert Romero, expressed skepticism that he could approve Friend's arrangements with her husband. He told her that "the rule of court says very clearly" that a conservator should avoid "any conflicts or any appearance of conflict."

Before that, families of the conservatees often raised their concerns with the court and filed complaints with the bureau, to no avail. "She's making a lot of money, her and her husband," said Poppy Helgren. Friend cared for Helgren's father, Lester Moore, for years. After Friend moved him to a residential care facility, Moore died from extreme constipation that was deemed the result of inadequate care, records show.

Carole Herman, a leading eldercare advocate, is one of the first people Californians call when they have a problem with a court-appointed fiduciary. In 2023, she filed a complaint with the Professional Fiduciaries Bureau about Friend's connection to Townsgate.

The bureau hasn't reported any response to the complaint, and Vargas would not discuss any pending complaints or investigations, calling them confidential.

“I am totally disappointed and devastated because I worked really hard to get that bureau started, and they have no teeth,” Herman said.

The six cases

Lester Moore joined the U.S. Navy at age 17. After he was discharged, Moore moved to California, where he went on to work in the airline industry. Moore grew up during the Great Depression, and over his lifetime, he and his wife amassed more than 450 acres of land in his home state of Arkansas, more than a quarter of a million dollars in company stock, and hundreds of thousands of dollars in investments and savings.

Moore ended up in a court-mandated conservatorship after he was diagnosed with dementia and his attorney was accused of professional misconduct. Friend was appointed the conservator in 2012.

For years, Friend relied on a local company to provide Moore’s caregiving services. She ended that relationship and put Townsgate in charge in April 2019, according to court filings. At that point, Townsgate didn’t have a license to provide in-home health care services, according to state records. Home care organizations that operate without a license can be fined $900 a day.

Later that year, Friend married Esquibias, according to her marriage license.

In 2019 and 2020, Moore paid Townsgate $145,000 for care, documents filed with the court show, but the records do not show that Friend disclosed her connection to Townsgate.

Then, in February 2020, Friend moved Moore to residential care and sold his home a few months later. Helgren was immediately concerned about her father’s care at the facility.

“I had put in complaints everywhere about them,” Helgren said. A year later, Moore died from septic shock from bowel obstruction and fecal impaction. A state investigation found Moore’s death was due to the facility not following Moore’s physician’s orders and its “failure to monitor” Moore’s condition, according to the state report. The facility has since closed.

CalMatters reviewed Friend’s publicly available cases and found six in which she used Townsgate for in-home services. She hired Esquibias to represent her in four of those cases, for which he was paid from conservatees’ funds.

Some of the others:

- Grace and Joseph Brown lived off Joseph Brown’s U.S. Navy retirement pay for years, with little debt. The court appointed Friend as Grace Brown’s conservator after she was diagnosed with dementia. At that time, Grace had $1.1 million in assets, according to the accounting Friend filed with the court.

From 2020 to 2023, Friend paid Townsgate $873,000 from Brown’s account for caregiving services, nearly 80% of her assets, according to the accounting that Friend filed with the court. At least $583,000 was paid “without prior Court approval, thereby severely depleting [Brown’s] funds,” according to a tentative ruling Lund issued in January 2024. He said he wanted to discuss forcing Friend to reimburse Brown. However, after the hearing, the judge approved the charges, calling them “settled, allowed, and approved” in his final order. His order does not mention Friend reimbursing Brown, and there is no transcript of the hearing. The judge also approved Friend’s charges totaling $46,000 for conservator fees.

James Brown, Grace’s stepson, thinks Grace was treated like “a cash cow.” He said Friend rarely responds to his questions about Grace, who is still under

Friend's care.

- Esperanza M. Moore was born in 1939 in the Philippines. She traveled the world before she met and married her husband, a physicist at Naval Base Ventura County Port Hueneme. Moore owned two properties.Ventura County officials asked the court to place Moore in a conservatorship after growing concerned that she was a victim of elder financial abuse.

Within a month of becoming Moore's court-appointed conservator, Friend brought on Townsgate In-Home Services for her care, without "prior Court approval," as required by court rules, according to notes from Judge Lund. Still, he later approved the payments.

Friend paid her husband's company $64,000 from Moore's funds over roughly three months in 2022. Then, Friend placed her in a less-expensive assisted-living home and sold her properties.

Friend was paid $76,000 for her fiduciary services from November 2021 to December 2024; Esquibias received another $68,000 in attorney fees for his work from December 2021 to March 2025 to represent Friend as she tried to recover money that had been taken from Moore by her previous caregiver.

In conservatorships, there are two attorneys who are typically paid from the conservatee's money — one for the person in the conservatorship and another for the licensed fiduciary.

Friend was still Moore's conservator as of this month, according to the court's website.

- Friend paid Townsgate nearly $680,000 from Molly Cooper's account from

September 2020 to March 2023, court records show. Her son, who asked that he not be named, said he was happy that his mother lived out her last days in her home rather than a nursing home. He said he had no idea about the connection when his mother was alive. Friend and Esquibias did not disclose their ties to Townsgate until after Cooper died, court records show.

In addition to Townsgate's costs, Friend billed Cooper $94,000 for her fiduciary services; Esquibias received $26,000 from Cooper's estate in attorney fees, court records show.

- James Baker Mabry retired after a career as an electrical contractor. During his free time, Mabry enjoyed scuba diving and volunteered with the county water rescue team. "He was always in the water," said his daughter, Kristin Tranquada. But as he aged, he was diagnosed with dementia, and his daughter petitioned the court to be his conservator. Her dad became angry and threatened her.Tranquada decided to step aside and let the court appoint a professional.Tranquada was grateful that Friend got her father to cooperate with caregivers. But as time went on, she and her sister began to question Friend's professionalism. Tranquada said Friend hadn't taken the necessary steps to transfer all of her father's bills. Plus, Friend had allowed Mabry to get a puppy, which eventually lived with one of Friend's employees. Then the sisters found out about Townsgate.Friend paid Townsgate $550,000 from Mabry's funds over three years, and the court approved the payments. Lund approved a total of $128,000 in conservator fees for Friend in 2022 and 2024. He also approved $22,000 for attorney fees to Esquibias. Friend eventually moved Mabry into a care home and sold his home with the court's approval. "This conservator's husband received a great deal of money that my father needs for his care," Tranquada said.

Robert Baskin, an attorney whose law firm represented at least two of Friend's clients who paid Townsgate, said he didn't see anything wrong with the arrangement as long as it was disclosed and approved by the court.

"I don't think that it is a conflict for a conservator to hire an affiliated agency like Townsgate," Baskin said. "They did an outstanding job at a reduced hourly rate."

He said conservatorships can naturally pit fiduciaries against family members. "You get a lot of people complaining because they are looking at their ultimate inheritance," Baskin said.

He also had his own financial connection to Friend, property records show. In 2018, his family trust lent her $1 million. The repayment terms of the agreement were not included. Baskin declined to comment on the loan. "I'm not going to comment on my own business dealings. I've loaned many people money."

In her letter, Friend told CalMatters that her "personal finances are entirely appropriate and, apart from what is a matter of public record, private."

Friend's previous run-in with the bureau

Before becoming a licensed fiduciary, Angelique Friend worked as a business analyst for Countrywide Financial, according to her LinkedIn profile. She got her fiduciary license in 2009 and built her business.

Licensed fiduciaries such as Friend manage affairs for seniors, people with disabilities and children. Fiduciaries can also be appointed by courts to administer estates when someone dies.

In 2017, an appeals court criticized Friend for her role in delivering an inheritance to two brothers who had been disinherited in their mother's will.

Friend argued that because the beneficiary, her grandson, was already dead when his grandmother died, the assets should be distributed as if she died without a will.The Court of Appeal noted that the woman did have a will; she expressly disinherited her two sons and awarded all the assets to her grandchild.

The appellate court called Friend's argument "troubling," saying Friend showed bias by not submitting the will for probate when it showed the woman's "intent to disinherit" her sons.The court ordered that the two brothers not receive an inheritance and that the probate judge remove Friend as administrator of the estate.

After the ruling, Friend contacted the Professional Fiduciaries Bureau to determine whether she had to report the removal on her annual statement, according to the citation.

The bureau told her that she did. But "despite receiving this information, (Friend) failed to report this resignation to the bureau," according to the agency. Friend was fined $750 in 2020 for failing to report a resignation and "dishonesty and unprofessional conduct."

In her Nov. 12, 2025, letter to CalMatters, Friend described it as "a minor technical oversight."

She has also drawn complaints for using Townsgate for at least one of her clients while she was serving as a trustee. CalMatters could not review records concerning her private trust clients because these cases typically aren't subject to the same public oversight as conservatorships, unless they are contested in court.

However, in a November court filing, family members in one case asked the court to remove Friend after learning that she "immediately" hired Townsgate after she

became trustee and paid the company $1.1 million from their family member's trust from 2021 to 2025.

The family members have asked the court to have Friend reimburse the trust for her "self-dealing." Baskin, who's representing Friend in the case, pushed back, arguing that Friend disclosed her connection to Townsgate, and that Friend has no ownership interest in Townsgate.

A hearing is scheduled for March 12.

Esquibias, who's known for helping troubled Nickelodeon child star Amanda Bynes get out of a conservatorship, has been a licensed attorney in California for more than three decades. He did not respond to questions about the conflict of interest or about Townsgate.

Esquibias started Townsgate the year he and Friend married after seeing "in-home care companies consistently provide overpriced, substandard, and neglectful care to my clients," he told the court.

When questioned about their conflicts in one case, Friend and Esquibias filed declarations saying that Friend was not "an agent, director, officer, employee, or consultant" at Townsgate.

However, state licensing records do show that she was involved with the company.

When Esquibias licensed Townsgate in 2019, Friend signed a pledge to be what's known as a sole delegate, agreeing to perform tasks on Esquibias's behalf and to be "continuously present during operational hours to represent" the company, "perform administrative processes, and to accept licensing reports."

In her letter to CalMatters, Friend said, “Any limited assistance I provided was informal and uncompensated.”

When state officials conducted an unannounced inspection at Townsgate’s offices in January 2020, they reported meeting with an “Angelique Love.”

Love is Friend’s maiden name, her marriage license shows.

‘A half-million dollar incentive’

Thomas O’Neil felt that something wasn’t right.

The retired UC San Diego theoretical physics professor spent his career solving complex problems, and the conservatorship that had engulfed his elderly aunt, Mary Jane Vind, and her dependent adult son, Charles Vind, was not making sense.Mary Jane Vind had spent her life taking care of her adult son, but as she got older, Charles had a difficult time caring for her.

“I was taking her to her doctor’s appointments, managing her medicine, and other things,” Charles said. But it wasn’t sufficient for Mary Jane’s needs.

After Adult Protective Services determined that Mary Jane had been neglected, Ventura County officials asked the court to appoint a private fiduciary to manage her and her finances.

Judge Lund appointed Angelique Friend.

When Esquibias opposed Charles Vind’s claim to a family property, O’Neil said he grew concerned.

Mary Jane Vind had made Charles a joint owner of her Oxnard beach home if he agreed to live with her as she aged, according to a petition Charles filed with the

court.

Esquibias argued that Charles Vind's care for his mother was so bad that he didn't live up to his end of the bargain, nullifying any agreement Charles and Mary Jane had. Mary Jane's attorney also said Charles Vind may have used undue influence to force his mother to add him to the deed.

O'Neil said their arguments just didn't "ring true."

For one, he said, Mary Jane was "quite a capable businesswoman." For another, the mother and son had an unusually close relationship.

"They were completely devoted to each other," he said.

He also didn't like the relationships between Friend, Esquibias and Townsgate, which was paid, on average, about $25,000 a month for caring for Vind over 16 months, totaling nearly $400,000, according to court filings.

Removing Charles from the title would free up nearly half a million dollars, money that would probably go right back to Friend and Esquibias, O'Neil wrote to Lund in July 2023.

"This creates a half-million dollar incentive for them to attempt to discredit and intimidate Charles to give up his property," he wrote.

O'Neil felt that Mary Jane dedicated her life to taking care of Charles, and she signed over the house to protect Charles, he said.

"I find it sad that Mary Jane's estate is now being consumed in fees from several attorneys and a conservator who are trying to undo Mary Jane's wishes, as well as

the quitclaim deed she signed to ensure Charles would not end up homeless," O'Neil said in a court declaration.

"This matter is really about a mother wanting her son to have a vested interest in the family property."

Complaints about conflicts continue

Months earlier, Kristin Tranquada wanted to know about Friend's relationship to Townsgate after Friend failed to disclose her connection to the company in court filings.

So she asked her father's attorney to bring it up in court in an April 2022 hearing, according to a transcript from the hearing. Esquibias said it was an oversight. And Lund said he didn't see a problem with using Townsgate because it was priced at or slightly below market.

But the complaints about Friend's conflict didn't stop.

In August 2022, police were called to the Vind home after Charles found a Townsgate employee lying in Mary Jane's room with his pants down and his penis exposed, according to testimony from Charles's deposition.

The detective who investigated the case, Det. Nora Starna, formerly of the Port Hueneme Police Department, expressed her concerns about Mary Jane's care and Townsgate to the court investigator, who frequently reviews conservatorships to see if they're needed. Starna told the court investigator that Friend and Esquibias didn't respond and cooperate with her investigation in a way that indicated they were looking out for Mary Jane's best interests.

Starna eventually closed the case, saying the caregiver's actions didn't rise to the level of a crime, and no charges were filed, according to the court investigator's report. Charles Vind's attorney told CalMatters that Townsgate removed the worker after the allegations.

In May 2023, court records indicate, Lund began to express concern about Townsgate's involvement with Mary Jane. He asked Friend to submit more information about the company. He asked her to "demonstrate that there were no other alternatives reasonably available."

Friend submitted invoices to the court showing that Townsgate's rates were lower than other providers, and Esquibias submitted the couple's property agreement, which outlined that Townsgate was solely his business.

But by that time, Friend had moved Mary Jane to a nursing home, paying $7,500 a month, a fraction of the roughly $25,000 a month she paid Townsgate.

Meanwhile, Tranquada and her sister continued to push back against using Townsgate for her father, James Baker Mabry.

"We just decided, anytime somebody asks us, we are going to bring this up, even though the judge has already said he's fine with it," she said.

Two years later, Tranquada was surprised to see that Lund had changed his mind, seemingly, she said, out of nowhere. In March 2024, he issued a tentative ruling demanding that Friend stop using Townsgate. But by that time, Friend had moved Tranquada's father into a care home, according to court records.

In court, Tranquada said it was a different story. Lund asked the attorneys what to do about Townsgate. Tranquada said her father's attorney said it was a moot

point. “Which infuriated me,” she said.

She said she’s never understood why Lund changed his mind. “It's the same judge. It's the same situation. What changed? she said.

Mabry died on Feb. 24. Tranquada said she learned about his death from Friend’s office in an email. “I am sorry to inform you that Mr. James Mabry just passed away. More details to follow as I know more,” reads the email that Tranquada forwarded to CalMatters.

She said she didn’t know her father had recently been hospitalized.

Waiting for his money

As Mary Jane Vind’s health declined, the dispute over Charles’s ownership was paused.

Charles eventually left his mother’s home after spending extended time in several hospitals. He now lives in a Southern California nursing home, he said. Friend sold all of Mary Jane's properties, which helped pay for Mary Jane’s care. Charles Vind’s proceeds from the sale of the home he owned with his mother, about $480,000, are in a client trust account held by Esquibias, waiting for the court to resolve the deed dispute.

Mary Jane Vind died in September.

Through 2025, Mary Jane paid Friend $108,000 for her conservatorship services and $65,000 to Esquibias for attorney’s fees.

In June 2025, court records show that Lund gave Friend her next assignment, appointing her as the conservator of a woman with an estate worth more than $3

million. Esquibias is not Friend's attorney. Financial accounting documents haven't yet been filed with the court that show who's providing health care to that client.

Lund declined to answer questions for this story. The same day Angelique Friend wrote a letter responding to CalMatters' questions about her and Esquibias, Friend removed Esquibias as her attorney on James Baker Mabry's case, replacing him with a new attorney, according to court filing records.

After word got out about Judge Lund's reassignment, a group of lawyers wrote the presiding judge requesting that he reconsider the decision. "Judge Lund upholds the rigorous standards of judicial conduct in both substance and demeanor," they wrote.

The first signature on the letter: David Esquibias.

In a letter, Presiding Judge Matthew P. Guasco declined their request.

"Rest assured I believe this decision is in the best interests of the court and the administration of justice," he wrote.

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