Advocate for disabled says group didn’t take voting-machine money

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By Tom Grace
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Chris Zachmeyer, executive director of the Catskill Center For Independence, said Tuesday that voting-machine manufacturers have tried to contribute money to her organization, which has given testimony on which voting machines Otsego County should buy.

However, she said she has not given in.

"It’s happened a couple of times," said Zachmeyer, who declined to identify the manufacturers.

"I told them, ‘I’d love to take your money, but I can’t,’" Zachmeyer said. "Those were my words exactly, and I would love to take their money because they’ve got deep pockets and we’re a small agency.

"But to what end?" Zachmeyer asked. "We would lose any credibility that we ever had, and no amount of money is worth it.

"We exist totally on our credibility," she said. "If people don’t trust what we have to say, we might as well lock our doors and go home."

The Catskill Center provides services to individuals with disabilities who reside in Delaware, Otsego, or Schoharie county and provides information, training and other disability-related assistance to family members, employers, landlords, government and other agencies, according to its website.

Zachmeyer said the offers "have only happened a couple of times to me, but you have to realize there are hundreds of millions of dollars at stake just in New York state. ... I’m sure there have been a lot of back-door deals made or a lot of back-door deals offered."

The issue of manufacturers using their money to influence agencies arose at a public hearing held by the Otsego County Board of Elections on Friday. For that hearing, Zachmeyer wrote a letter asking the county’s elections commissioners to consider buying direct recording electronic machines made by Sequoia Voting Machines.

After Zachmeyer’s letter was read, Hank Nicols, the county’s Democratic elections commissioner, said the BOE had received a letter from Adrian Kuzminski, of Fly Creek, saying that some agencies purporting to represent disabled people have been paid surreptitiously to lobby for DREs.

Nicols, who has said he prefers optical scanners to DREs, prefaced his remarks by saying he was sure the Catskill Center was beyond reproach.

Kuzminski said Tuesday that he sent the letter because he is distressed at the prospect that the county will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars for voting machines that may not be as trustworthy as lever machines.

In his letter, he excerpted an interview with Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on http://www.bradblog.com that appeared July 18. Kennedy said that one voting-machine manufacturer had given $1 million to an organization that purports to represent blind people, and in exchange, the organization gave testimony favoring the manufacturers’ machine.

Zachmeyer said she had heard of the connection between the manufacturer and the organization, but the alleged bribing occurred about four years ago.

She said it was unfortunate that the issue was raised just after her recommendation was read to the commissioners, and the center is interested only in finding the best voting machines for people with disabilities.