



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

TP: Make Jefferson warrants public

Push for details centers on New Orleans raids

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Staff reports

The Times-Picayune on Monday asked two federal courts to unseal legal paperwork that led to the Aug. 3 raid on the New Orleans home of U.S. Rep. William Jefferson.

On Aug. 3, federal agents raided Jefferson's Marengo Street home, his car and the Poydras Street office of his longtime campaign treasurer, Jack Swetland.

Two associates of the congressman have pleaded guilty to federal charges, admitting they were involved in a scheme in which they say Jefferson sought bribes to promote a U.S. telecommunications firm doing business in Nigeria and Ghana.

Jefferson has not been charged in the case and has denied any wrongdoing.

On Monday, The Times-Picayune asked the local federal district court and the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to unseal the search warrants that led to the Aug. 3 raids. The newspaper also asked for the applications, affidavits, returns and inventories filed in connection with the search warrants.

A Maryland court has called for the unsealing of a separate search warrant for the Potomac, Md., home of the wife of the Nigerian vice president, though the warrant has not been made public while Jefferson appeals that decision. Prosecutors did not oppose the unsealing of those documents.

In the Louisiana case, The Times-Picayune said a federal probe involving a member of Congress is "a matter of substantial public concern" and that the public has a right of access to court proceedings and documents. The court can only keep the records secret if there is a compelling reason publicity would damage Jefferson, the newspaper argued, which is unlikely since the scope of the probe already has been made public through the guilty pleas of his associates.

The newspaper filed its motion in two courts because, since the warrants are sealed, it is not clear what court they are filed in.

In the district court, the case was assigned to Judge Sarah Vance. In the 5th Circuit, the case has not been assigned.