

Women want sex plea deal unsealed

*Their attorneys will ask a judge
to open Jeffrey Epstein's records.*

By SUSAN SPENCER-WENDEL
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

WEST PALM BEACH — When wealthy money manager Jeffrey Epstein of Palm Beach pleaded guilty last year to procuring teens for prostitution, his case detoured around local and state rules regarding the sealing of court documents.

At a plea conference on the state charges, a judge, a defense lawyer and a prosecutor huddled at the bench and decided that a deal Epstein had struck with federal prosecutors to avoid charges should be sealed, according to a transcript of the hearing.

And so it was.

But Florida rules of judicial administration, as well as rules of the Palm Beach County court system, require public notification that a court document has been or will be sealed, meaning kept from public view. The rules also require a judge to find a significant reason to seal,



Epstein

See EPSTEIN, 4A ►

See past coverage of Jeffrey Epstein's sex scandals. PalmBeachPost.com/epstein

Public has right to know details of deal, Post attorney will claim

► EPSTEIN from 1A

such as protecting a trade secret or a compelling government interest.

Yet no notification or reason occurred in Epstein's case, according to court records.

Epstein's own attorneys, in federal filings, have referred to his confidential deferred prosecution agreement with the U.S. attorney's office, struck in September 2007, as "unprecedented" and "highly unusual." And it was "a significant inducement" for Epstein to accept the state's deal, observed the state judge who accepted his plea, County Judge Deborah Dale Pucillo.

Epstein now faces at least a dozen civil lawsuits in federal and state courts filed by young women who said they had sex with him and now are seeking damages.

Attorneys for some of those women want his agreement with federal prosecutors unsealed and will ask Circuit Judge Jeffrey Colbath to do so today.

"It is against public policy for these documents to be have been sealed and hidden from public scrutiny. As a member of the public, E.W. has a right to have these documents unsealed," wrote former Circuit Judge Bill Berger, now in private

practice and representing one of the women.

The Palm Beach Post also will ask Colbath to unseal the agreement. *Post* attorney Deanna Shullman will argue that the public has a right to know the specifics of Epstein's deal.

According to various media accounts, Epstein moved in circles that included President Clinton, Donald Trump and Prince Andrew. "International Moneyman of Mystery," declared a 2002 *New York* magazine profile of Epstein.

Epstein, 56, is in the Palm Beach County Stockade, serving an 18-month sentence after pleading guilty nearly a year ago to felony solicitation of prostitution and procuring teenagers for prostitution.

He is allowed out from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., escorted by a deputy, said Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office spokeswoman Teri Barbera.

During a Palm Beach Police Department investigation, five victims and 17 witnesses gave statements. They told of young women brought by his assistants to Epstein's mansion on El Brillo Way for massages and sexual activity, and then being paid afterward.

At Epstein's plea conference last year, his attorney, Jack Goldberger, and then-Assistant State At-

torney Lanna Belohlavek approached Pucillo in a sidebar conference. Pucillo, who had left the bench nine years earlier, was filling in temporarily as a senior judge.

According to a transcript, Goldberger told Pucillo that Epstein had entered a confidential agreement with the U.S. attorney's office in which federal prosecutors brokered not pursuing charges against him if he pleaded guilty in state court. Pucillo then said she wanted a sealed copy of the agreement filed in his case, and Goldberger concurred that he wanted it sealed. Belohlavek later signed off on it.

The Florida Supreme Court has expressed "serious concern" and launched an all-out inquiry into sealing procedures across the state following media reports in 2006 of entire cases being sealed and disappearing from court records.

"The public's constitutional right of access to court records must remain inviolate, and this court is fully committed to safeguarding this right," justices wrote in their final report.

Epstein's office on Tuesday referred any questions to Goldberger, who declined to comment. Pucillo also has declined to comment.

©susan_spencer_wendel@pbpost.com