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Ethics Inquiries Into Lawmakers Surface via Security Breach

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WASHINGTON — The House ethics committee announced Thursday that it would begin full investigations into two House members, [Maxine Waters](#) and Laura Richardson, but a security breach threatened to make public the names of many other members facing ethics inquiries.

The separate investigations into private financial matters of Ms. Waters and Ms. Richardson, both California Democrats, suggest a stepped-up effort by the ethics committee at a time when it has faced criticism for the slow pace of its work.

The security breach related to a document containing the names of more than two dozen members of Congress whose conduct had come into question, along with the status of those investigations, according to House officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

To avoid unfair damage to a lawmaker's reputation, investigations usually become public only after a preliminary inquiry.

Including the investigations of Ms. Waters and Ms. Richardson, the committee has now publicly acknowledged at least eight investigations, with the most prominent focused on Representative [Charles B. Rangel](#), Democrat of New York and chairman of the Ways and Means Committee.

A committee statement about the security breach said a junior staff member, working from home, improperly placed a document listing all the continuing inquiries into a file-sharing software system to which people outside the committee had access. The staff member, whose name was not released, has been fired, and committee officials said Thursday that they did not know who had gained improper access to the document.

The Washington Post, which reported Thursday evening in [an article on its Web site](#) that it had a copy of the memorandum, said the document indicated that at least seven lawmakers are the focus of a previously announced investigation into earmarks given to military contractors at the request of a now-defunct Washington lobbying firm, the PMA Group. The lawmakers are five Democrats — [John P. Murtha](#) of Pennsylvania, Peter J. Visclosky of Indiana, James P. Moran of Virginia, Norm Dicks of Washington and Marcy Kaptur of Ohio — and two Republicans, Todd Tiahrt of Kansas and C. W. Bill Young of Florida. Some House staff members were skeptical of the committee's explanation, saying tight security protocols were designed to prevent such an episode. Committee officials, embarrassed by the breach, appeared to be bracing on Thursday evening for the public disclosure of its internal business.

“No inference to any misconduct can be made from the fact that a matter is simply before the committee,” the committee statement cautioned.

House officials on Thursday would not provide a copy of the list of pending inquiries or the party affiliation of those on it.

In the case of Ms. Waters, the ethics committee announced Thursday that it was impaneling a subcommittee to look at her involvement in setting up a meeting last year between minority bankers and federal regulators.

One of the banks that was most vocal at the Treasury Department meeting, OneUnited Bank, asked for \$50 million in federal assistance. Ms. Waters and her husband, Sidney Williams, owned stock in the bank, and Mr. Williams had served on its board. The ethics committee said it would look at “the benefit, if any, Representative Waters or her husband received as a result” of her involvement with the bank.

Ms. Waters said she was confident she would be exonerated and pointed to her long support for minority-owned business that had been historically denied access to government regulators.

The committee said it would investigate accusations that Ms. Richardson might have received improper benefits on a home she owned in Sacramento that was foreclosed on or that she might have failed to note her ownership interest on Congressional disclosure forms.

Ms. Richardson said in a statement that she had been “subjected to premature judgments, speculation and

baseless distractions that will finally be addressed in a fair, unbiased, bipartisan evaluation of the facts.”

The panel also said Thursday that it would not pursue an investigation against Representative Sam Graves, Republican of Missouri, saying he had not violated House rules by inviting a business associate of his wife’s to testify at a hearing on renewable energy without disclosing his relationship to the witness.

Eric Lipton contributed reporting.

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