

Probe of deputies' fund is dropped

Investigation into use of a trust to pay court fees for a Riverside County deputy is over, for now.

[INLAND EMPIRE EDITION]

(Copyright (c) 2006 Los Angeles Times)

Federal officials investigating whether money from the Riverside Sheriffs' Assn.'s legal trust fund was embezzled or misused have ended their probe without filing charges, according to a lawyer for the trust.

In September, federal agents raided the association's office as part of an FBI and U.S. Department of Labor investigation into allegations that money had been illegally taken from the union's legal trust fund to pay attorney's fees for a former Riverside County sheriff's deputy who is a close friend of the union president.

But on Thursday, association lawyers said they received a two-sentence letter from the U.S. attorney's office stating it had closed its investigation but reserved the right to reopen the case. Officials with the U.S. attorney's office declined to comment Thursday.

Lawyers for the association, which represents 3,000 deputies and other law enforcement and public safety personnel employed by Riverside County, said they felt vindicated.

"We're exuberant," said Michael J. Proctor, a lawyer representing Riverside Sheriffs' Assn. Legal Defense Trust. "This letter basically equals a clean bill of health for [the union] and legal defense trust."

Proctor said union and trust officials cooperated with federal officials throughout the investigation. "If there was any wrongdoing, they would have found it," Proctor said. "This all started by some off-the-cuff allegations made by some disgruntled employee."

The person making the accusations was Scott Teutscher, who, along with union president Pat McNamara, oversaw the operations of the legal defense fund. Teutscher alleged that McNamara had improperly used the money to pay for legal fees for a friend and former deputy, Duane Winchell, who was charged with stalking and vandalism in 2002.

Union attorney Manny Abascal has said that the organization acted appropriately in providing fired deputy.

The association's Legal Defense Trust is set up to provide lawyers for union members in job-related disputes.

Laurie Levenson, Loyola Law School professor and former federal prosecutor, said that although federal officials had closed their investigation, the letter didn't quite clear union officials of wrongdoing.

"It's not saying that they're exonerated," she said. "It's just saying that there's no case at this time but they're free to take another look if more information comes their way."

*

sara.lin@latimes.com

Credit: Times Staff Writer

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without