

PRESS RELEASE

Internal Revenue Service - Criminal Investigation *Chief Richard Weber*

Date: February 8, 2017

Contact: *CI-HQ-COMMUNICATIONSEDCATION@ci.irs.gov
IRS – Criminal Investigation

CI Release #: CI-2017-02-08-C

Former Chief Of Staff to Member of Congress Pleads Guilty to Fraud and Theft Charges

A former Congressional chief of staff pleaded guilty today for his role in a conspiracy and fraud scheme involving a fraudulent scholarship charity and for stealing tens of thousands of dollars in congressional salary payments disbursed to a close relative who performed no known work.

Acting Assistant Attorney General Kenneth A. Blanco of the Justice Department's Criminal Division, U.S. Attorney A. Lee Bentley III of the Middle District of Florida, Special Agent in Charge Charles P. Spencer of the FBI's Jacksonville, Florida, Division and Special Agent in Charge Mary Hammond of the Internal Revenue Service-Criminal Investigation (IRS-CI) Tampa, Florida, Field Office made the announcement.

Elias "Ronnie" Simmons, 51, of Laurel, Maryland, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud and one count of theft of government property before U.S. Magistrate Judge James R. Klindt of the Middle District of Florida. A sentencing hearing has not yet been set.

In connection with his guilty plea, Simmons admitted that, between late 2012 and early 2016, he and a co-defendant, former Congresswoman Corrine Brown, 70, of Jacksonville, Florida, participated in a fraudulent scheme involving the One Door for Education – Amy Anderson Scholarship Fund (One Door) in which the two defendants and others acting on their behalf solicited more than \$800,000 in charitable donations based on false representations that the donations would be used for college scholarships and school computer drives, among other things. As part of the scheme, Simmons admitted that he and Brown solicited donations from individuals and corporate entities that Brown knew by virtue of her position in the U.S. House of Representatives, many of which the defendants led to believe that One Door was a properly registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, when, in fact, it was not.

Simmons further admitted that, contrary to his and Brown's misrepresentations, Brown, Simmons, One Door president Carla Wiley, and others, used the vast majority of One Door donations for their personal and professional benefit, including tens of thousands of dollars in cash deposits that Simmons made to Brown's personal bank accounts. Simmons admitted that he engaged in such cash transactions involving funds from the One Door bank account at Brown's direction. In one instance, Simmons admitted depositing \$2,100 in One Door funds into

Brown's personal bank account the same day that Brown wrote a check for a similar amount to pay taxes to the IRS. Likewise, Simmons admitted that he and Brown also used the outside consulting company of one of Brown's employees to funnel One Door and other funds to Brown and others for their personal use. Further, Simmons acknowledged that more than \$200,000 in One Door funds also were used to pay for events hosted by Brown or held in her honor, including a golf tournament in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida; lavish receptions during an annual conference in Washington, D.C.; the use of a luxury box during a Beyoncé concert in Washington, D.C.; and the use of a luxury box during an NFL game between the Washington Redskins and the Jacksonville Jaguars in the Washington, D.C. area.

Despite raising over \$800,000 in donations, Simmons admitted that One Door was associated with only two scholarships, totaling \$1,200, awarded to students to cover expenses related to attending a college or university.

In connection with his guilty plea, Simmons also admitted that he misused his position as Brown's chief of staff to obtain congressional employment for a close relative, who received over \$735,000 in government salary payments between 2001 and early 2016 despite performing no known work for the U.S. House of Representatives. Between 2009 and late 2015, Simmons admitted that he diverted over \$80,000 of the relative's government salary for his personal benefit, including through transfers to his personal bank accounts, payments on his personal credit cards and loan payments on his boat.

Simmons and Brown originally were indicted in July 2016. Brown's trial has been set for April 24, 2017. The charges and allegations against Brown are merely accusations, and she is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty. Wiley, the president of One Door, pleaded guilty to wire fraud conspiracy on March 3, 2016, and will be sentenced on June 12, 2017.

The FBI's Jacksonville Division and IRS-CI investigated the case. Deputy Chief Eric G. Olshan of the Criminal Division's Public Integrity Section and Assistant U.S. Attorneys A. Tysen Duva and Michael J. Coolican of the Middle District of Florida are prosecuting the case.

###