



U.S. District Court Judge Robert Sweet was appointed by President Jimmy Carter in 1978, confirmed that same year and continued to hear and rule on cases through the last few months. | Joe Raedle/Getty Images

[Legal](#)

Judge overseeing key Jeffrey Epstein-related suit dies in manner convenient to Epstein

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An elderly federal judge presiding over a key lawsuit relating to financier pedophile Jeffrey Epstein died Sunday, adding another twist to the drawn-out legal saga and to efforts to unseal still-secret details about the conduct of Epstein, his enablers and one of his accusers.

Manhattan-based U.S. District Court Judge Robert Sweet passed away Sunday at age 96, the court announced. Sweet was appointed by President Jimmy Carter in 1978, confirmed that same year and continued to hear and rule on cases through the last few months.

Sweet was assigned to a lawsuit that emerged from the aftermath of Epstein's controversial plea deal a decade ago, in which he escaped federal charges by pleading guilty to two prostitution-related offenses in state court. Epstein ended up spending 13 months in jail, with daily furloughs that allowed him to work in his office.

Critics have denounced the plea deal and the government official who negotiated it: Alexander Acosta, then the top federal prosecutor in south Florida and now U.S. secretary of Labor. The sentence, critics say, was excessively lenient for a man who faced allegations of procuring dozens of teenage girls for sex acts.

The sex trafficking lawsuit that Sweet oversaw pitted one of Epstein's alleged victims, Virginia Roberts Giuffre, against a longtime friend of Epstein and heir to a newspaper fortune, Ghislaine Maxwell.

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In exchange for financial settlements, Giuffre and many other victims waived their right to sue Epstein. But those waivers did not preclude lawsuits against some others, like Maxwell, who were alleged to have facilitated Epstein's efforts to hire teenagers to provide massages that often involved sex.

Maxwell denied the allegations but settled the suit on the eve of trial in 2017 after Sweet turned down her lawyers' motion to shut down the case.

The settlement did not end the controversy, however. During the course of the case, Sweet approved blanket sealing of many of the submissions from both sides, detailing some of the best arguments and evidence they intended to present if the case went to trial.

The secrecy eventually prompted motions from Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, author and social media personality Mike Cernovich and the Miami Herald to unseal some or all of the records in suit.

Dershowitz, a former lawyer for Epstein, is seeking unsealing because he says the court files contain evidence that can prove him innocent of claims Giuffre and another woman made that they had sex with him at Epstein's direction. Cernovich has said he's offended by the secrecy in the case and eager to expose pedophilia among American elites. The Miami Herald sought the information as part of reporting for a series it wound up publishing last year.

Sweet turned down the motions, prompting a series of appeals.

At an argument session earlier this month, three 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals judges seemed to view the secrecy in the suit as excessive and unjustified.

All the judges on the panel appeared to favor making some records from the case public soon, but there was some discussion about the process for considering opening all the records. One question debated at the argument was whether Sweet should oversee that process or whether it should be handed over to another judge. That question is now moot.

Maxwell has opposed unsealing records in the case. In addition, last week, two anonymous individuals came forward to urge the appeals court not to release information in the court files about third parties who may have been discussed during depositions in the case.

Interest in the Epstein case escalated following the publication of the Herald series and in the wake of a judge's ruling last month that federal prosecutors, including Acosta, violated federal law by misleading alleged victims about the status of the case against Epstein in the weeks leading up to the plea deal in 2008.