Jackson’s leave mystifying
By Sophia Tareen and Henry C. Jackson
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CHICAGO — When Rep. Jesse L. Jackson Jr. disappeared from Washington last month for a mysterious medical leave, it took weeks for anyone there to even notice.

It was a measure of the disconnect between his famous name and his stature on Capitol Hill. The 47-year-old son of the legendary civil rights leader has become simply a congressman who can deliver the pork back home.

Mr. Jackson arrived in Washington 17 years ago with a star quality that set him apart from his 434 colleagues in the House. Yet he has never lived up to those high expectations on the national stage, gaining a reputation in the nation’s capital for quixotic pursuits such as trying to impeach President George W. Bush and push through constitutional amendments that had no chance at all.

One big reason given for his failure to rise to a more statesmanlike role is the cloud of suspicion that has hung over him for more than three years because of his dealings with corrupt former Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

“He was, up until about 2008, clearly a rising star,” said Dick Simpson, a former city alderman and a political scientist at the University of Illinois at Chicago. “After that his whole reputation collapsed, and he’s not been able to move forward.”

None of that seems to matter in his Chicago-area district, where the Democrat has brought home close to $1 billion in federal money and won every election in a landslide since he won the seat in a special election in 1995.

Now, many of his constituents are willing to cut him some slack over the way he has released only scant details about his medical condition in recent weeks.

Ford Heights Mayor Charles Griffin said that Mr. Jackson’s health is a private matter and that he has no problem with the way the congressman hasn’t disclosed his location or detailed his condition beyond calling it a “mood disorder.” Mr. Griffin’s town of about 2,700 people is one of the poorest in Illinois, and Mr. Jackson was key in bringing it drinking water from Lake Michigan.

“I have no idea what his relationship is on the national level,” Mr. Griffin said. “The only thing I know is that he’s … been successful in bringing back resources and funds to do things to get things moving. And that’s the type of approach we need.”
While Mr. Jackson clearly once had his sights set on becoming a senator or the mayor of Chicago, he seems resigned to playing the role of a politician devoted to local issues. He said earlier this year that the late-1990s water project in Ford Heights was a highlight of his career, not his role as Barack Obama’s campaign co-chairman, which earned him a speaking spot at the 2008 Democratic National Convention.

“When I first went to Congress, I promised to bring fresh water to Ford Heights,” Mr. Jackson said. “That promise has been fulfilled.”

The Rev. Jesse Jackson’s eldest son was groomed for the national political scene from the beginning, it seemed.

He attended a top private school in Washington and earned a law degree and a master’s degree in theology. He has bragged about spending his 21st birthday in jail after being arrested in an anti-apartheid protest. He co-wrote books with his father and developed his own charismatic speaking style, one that is often punctuated by vigorous pointing with a raised index finger.

Shortly after taking office, he was deemed People magazine’s “Sexiest Politician” in 1997. He became one of the most outspoken and most quoted liberals in the House. An almost Hollywood buzz broke out over his svelte new figure in 2005 when he quietly dropped 50 pounds, disclosing months later that he had had weight-loss surgery.

But he also put significant time and energy behind a raft of big-ticket liberal ideas that largely went nowhere.
In 2001, after Mr. Bush took office, Mr. Jackson began to push constitutional amendments that would guarantee a right to universal health care and housing. In 2007, he was one of a small number of lawmakers to call for articles of impeachment against the president. Earlier this year, he pushed for a raise in the minimum wage, an idea that never stood a chance in the GOP-dominated House.

His highest-profile project in the district, a proposed third airport in the Chicago area, never went anywhere over questions of who should run it and whether it was needed.

Mr. Jackson was expected to have distinguished himself more by now.

“He’s got one of the most recognizable names in the country. It carries its burdens and is one that he wanted to attain some kind of national visibility,” said Alan Gitelson, a Loyola University political science professor. But, “We can’t point to any area where Congressman Jackson has marked himself as a leader. His role has been relatively more homestyle than anything else.”