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Black firefighter awarded \$1.17 million

Carter Stephens says harassment complaints to superiors in the Pasadena department only led to retaliation.

By Hector Becerra, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
December 29, 2007

A jury awarded \$1.17 million Friday to a black former Pasadena firefighter who said he was forced to retire after complaining for five years about other firefighters leaving blood, urine and feces in his bedding and scrawling a swastika on his equipment.

The penalty was just the latest case of a black firefighter alleging discrimination against a fire department in Los Angeles and surrounding communities.

According to Carter Stephens' suit, supervisors and co-workers also put mucus on his uniform and a captain referred to him by the "N" word.

Stephens, 55, said he felt vindicated after enduring racially-motivated attacks for five years.

"The general thought was, 'You just have go ahead and take a beating. Maybe it'll stop,'" he said. "That's what I tried to do. But it wouldn't stop."

Stephens said he filed numerous complaints to his supervisors, but instead of getting better, things got worse.

According to media reports of the trial, attorneys for the city argued that Stephens was not out for justice but for money. Under questioning, Stephens acknowledged that sometimes it was red-colored ink and not blood that was left on his bedding.

He also testified that he was once fired by the department after being convicted of charges related to the flattening of car tires. Stephens got his job back after an arbitrator's ruling, according to media reports.

Pasadena Mayor Bill Bogaard said it was too early for him to appraise what had happened.

"I'm just reluctant to add any wisdom or meaningful observations to this case until I'm briefed by the city attorney," Bogaard said. "We have cases going all the time, and the city's record of success is very good."

Stephens' case was the most recent lump dealt to an L.A. area fire department involving either racial or gender discrimination.

The highest-profile case involved former L.A. city Firefighter Tennie Pierce, who alleged that he had been served a spaghetti dinner spiked with dog food while on duty at Fire Station No. 5 in Westchester.

Some colleagues described it as a prank that played on the 6-foot-5 firefighter's nickname of "Big Dog." But in September, the City Council voted to pay Pierce nearly \$1.5 million.

The settlement averted a trial that could have revealed embarrassing details about hazging in the city Fire Department.

In July, a jury awarded \$6.3 million to a former female city firefighter who said she had been harassed because she was black and a lesbian.

A month earlier, a jury awarded \$3.75 million to a veteran city fire captain who contended that he was retaliated against for not making training exercises easier for

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women.

Last year, an audit of the city Fire Department found that 87% of African Americans and nearly 80% of women surveyed said they were aware of or had experienced discrimination. The audit also found that hazing and pranks were part of firefighting culture, sometimes blurring the line between harassment and firehouse high jinks.

The persistent allegations of racial and sexual discrimination within the department prompted then-Chief William Bamattre to step down a year ago.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson, an author and analyst who heads the Los Angeles Urban Policy Roundtable, said he was not surprised by the verdict against Pasadena.

"I think if you look at the history of these fire departments, even more so than police departments, they've always operated under the radar," he said. "It's always been a good old boys network."

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