

Fireman suing over alleged hostility

He says members of the L.A. County Fire Dept. punished him for trying to stop comments about a firefighter perceived to be gay.

By SUSANNAH ROSENBLATT
Times Staff Writer

Firefighter Gonzalo Salgado is suing the Los Angeles County Fire Department, alleging retaliation and hostile treatment after he told colleagues to stop making derogatory conversation about another firefighter perceived to be gay.

In the case scheduled to go to trial today, Salgado said that in 2000, after he confronted some of his co-workers at the Temple City fire station about their comments, fellow firefighters made Salgado a target of "ongoing and systematic" mistreatment.

Salgado was unreasonably punished for allegedly losing equipment, was transferred to four different fire stations in as many months and was passed over for promotion, according to the lawsuit complaint.

County officials said they welcomed the trial.

Salgado, 46, had complained to the county Office of Affirmative Action Compliance and to the Fire Department's employee relations officials. Salgado alleges in the complaint that the Fire Department took years to complete its investigation, which he said was sloppily conducted.

Official reviews found no pattern of mistreatment toward Salgado, according to county investigation records, but did conclude that department man-

clude that department managers did not appropriately report the conversation about a firefighter's perceived sexual orientation.

The complaint alleges that Salgado's supervisor, Capt. Lee Gregory, "attempted to minimize the inflammatory nature of the discussion by contending that it was a joke." Fire Department employee relations officials recommended discipline for the gossiping firefighters, but none was imposed, according to the complaint.

"In my opinion, this case is just the tip of the iceberg," said Steven Haney, Salgado's attorney.

Because of the stress Salgado says he experienced from working in a hostile environment, Haney plans to request damages of more than \$1 million. Outside attorneys representing the Fire Department declined to comment.

With more than 4,000 county fire employees, "sometimes there are misunderstandings and grievances and so forth," said Fire Chief P. Michael Freeman. "We try to do the right thing and we try to be fair to everybody."

The department's "emphasis is always on courtesy and respect to all people in the job, in the firehouse, as well as anywhere else in the department," Freeman said.

Although Freeman declined to comment on the specifics of Salgado's case because of the litigation, he added that if "someone has a complaint, the department does take appropriate action based on the facts, as we can determine what they are and past practice."

The department does not tolerate retaliation, he said.

The county case comes amid a series of costly discrimination lawsuits against the Los Angeles City Fire Department. Allegations of departmental racism by black firefighter Tennie Pierce, whose co-workers slipped dog food into his spaghetti in 2004, roiled the City Council and ultimately brought down then-Fire Chief William Bamattre. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa vetoed a \$2.7 million settlement for Pierce that had been approved by the City Council, after the amount drew public disapproval; Pierce was awarded \$1.5 million in a September agreement.

Bamattre was forced out amid allegations of long-standing racism and harassment in the department, including a discrimination lawsuit brought by firefighter Brenda Lee, a black lesbian who was awarded \$6.2 million by a jury in July. Another firefighter who alleged departmental retaliation for helping Lee was awarded \$1.7 million by a jury in the spring.

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