

Harassment claimed by firefighter

By Elizabeth Hume -- Bee Staff Writer

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A female Sacramento firefighter filed a sexual-harassment claim with the city Monday, alleging she has been hazed and threatened by male firefighters in a series of incidents in the past year.

Carol L. Irving, 37, found a threatening photograph in her locker, a mousetrap in her boot and a sexual slur painted on her axe handle, according to the claim against the city and the Fire Department.

Although the claim lists as a defendant only one firefighter by name, Eric Guida, it said it could involve up to 50 others.

They could include many of the so-called "Orangemen," named for Station 6's official color and known for their rigid adherence to traditional firefighting methods.

The claim, which is a precursor to a lawsuit, comes after a nearly yearlong Fire Department investigation into the alleged incidents against Irving and other incidents that led to numerous transfers from the Oak Park station.

The claim alleges that officials failed to take "immediate and corrective action to stop the harassment, retaliation and discrimination."

Seeking unspecified damages, the claim says officials also failed to take action against Guida and that the city retained him, "knowing that this employee has retaliated against and harassed other employees on previous occasions."

Attempts to contact Guida for comment were unsuccessful.

Officials from the Fire Department and the City Manager's Office declined to comment about the claim, referring inquiries to a city attorney, who did not return calls.

"Her career path was headed in a very positive direction, and now it has taken a U-turn to the point that her career ... is now uncertain," said Wendy York, Irving's lawyer.

After graduating from the University of California, Davis, in 1988 with a degree in human development, Irving worked with underprivileged teenagers who were trying to get into college.

While Irving was working as a bike guide, York said, one of her co-workers suggested she try firefighting as a career.

She started in 1993 as a volunteer firefighter with the Dry Creek-Lokoya department before joining the Sacramento Fire Department in 1995.

Of the 36 candidates in her academy class, Irving did more push-ups than anyone else - man or woman - and was one of the top runners.

"Carol had a drive and ambition to set herself apart and establish credibility with male firefighters to show that she was worthy and deserving of this job," York said.

In 1997, Irving placed fourth nationwide in the women's Firefighters Combat Challenge, which was televised on ESPN.

Since joining the Fire Department, Irving has served as a drill instructor for two academy classes and has been involved in the Firefighters Burn Institute.

Irving is working on her master's degree in liberal arts at California State University, Sacramento, with a concentration in historical architecture.

After she tested to be an apparatus operator, she was ranked at the top of the promotion list.

Traditionally, York said, women have steered away from firefighting trucks - which are larger and have more heavy operating equipment such as ladders - because they tend to be more physically demanding than the smaller engines, which are used for spraying water. But Irving chose the truck over the engine, and in 2000 she became the city's first female truck operator.

Since the alleged incidents, Irving has been taken off the truck and placed on an engine as part of a transfer to another station during what fire officials have called a 120-day "cooling off" period while the investigation continues.

"She does perceive it as a demotion," York said. "The station is less active. There is not nearly the prestige that Station 6 offered."

Irving, whose husband is a captain with the Fire Department, is on medical leave.

York said the problems at Station 6 seem to have stemmed from an incident last year during Irving's second assignment as a drill instructor at the academy.

At a drill instructor meeting before academy classes started, several "Orangemen" were promoting their philosophy, York said.

Irving was one of several who spoke out against promoting "Orangemen" traditions at the academy.

"She said she didn't believe this was the appropriate place or time to raise those issues," York said. "Words were said that made Carol feel like she wouldn't fit in."

After her stint at the academy, York said, a truck captain asked Irving to join his C Shift crew at Station 6. The first alleged harassment incident occurred soon after she arrived.

The claims says someone put orange paint in Irving's safety-coat pocket. A few days later, she found a four-letter sexual slur written on her axe handle.

Shortly thereafter, she went on medical leave, York said.

When she returned, the claim states, Guida took a "physical stance" against Irving and would not allow her to pass.

After she reported the incident, the claim says, Irving found a picture in her locker of a female doll with a gun to its head and duct tape across its mouth.

That was followed by a mousetrap in one of her boots and a threat written on a notice board in the station.

The claim blames the city for not taking the appropriate actions to stop the harassment and punish those responsible.

"There are a few firefighters that have poisoned the process, and administration has done nothing about it," York said. "It's ironic because they're supposed to be doing good for people, and they are hurting people that they are working with."