

Officials troubled after firefighter's harassment claim

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Sacramento officials expressed concern Tuesday in the wake of a sexual harassment claim filed by a female firefighter at Station 6.

"I'm really very disappointed that something like this has come out," said Councilwoman Sandra Sheedy. "Firefighters are really one of the more vital and respected groups we have."

Named as defendants are the city, the Fire Department and firefighter Eric Guida and up to 50 unnamed others.

The Oak Park station covers a portion of Councilwoman Lauren Hammond's District 5.

"I think the city has to do a much better job at diversifying the Fire Department, and if this incident doesn't prove it, I don't know what does," she said.

Fire Engineer Carol Irving filed the claim with the city on Monday. The claim, which seeks unspecified damages, is a precursor to a lawsuit that could be filed in state or federal court.

Irving's lawyer, Wendy York, said several of the incidents were in reaction to her client's reporting of an obscene word written on her ax handle.

When Irving returned from a leave of absence, she found a picture in her locker of a female doll with gun to its head and duct tape over its mouth.

"They were trying to send a message to her to either intimidate her or shut her up," York said.

According to the claim, the Fire Department and city mishandled the incidents, creating what York called "a very polluted and toxic work environment."

"The investigation has been bungled from the start and it just gets worse," York said.

No one has been charged in any incident after nearly a year of investigation and interviews.

"They have a different duty, but it doesn't prevent them for standing up for what's right and equal treatment," Hammond said.

The City Manager's Office recently put new life into the investigation by hiring former homicide detective John Cabrera.

"To take any personnel action, you have to have facts," said City Manager Bob Thomas. "It's obvious to me that people in the system know how the parties are involved. We are not satisfied with the limited information that we have received."

Since the city has failed to find the culprits, York said, Irving is concerned about retaliation.

"If you're in Carol's shoes, you feel like you have nowhere to turn, you have no one to trust," York said.

The incidents started, York said, with a confrontation between Irving and several "Orangemen," who had badges that read "Fireman not Firefighter."

Several firefighters at Station 6 call themselves "Orangemen," based on the station's color code that allows firefighters to identify a station's equipment quickly.

Brian Rice, president of Sacramento Area Fire Fighters Local 522, said stations sometimes take a nickname as a form of pride.

"At that level it can result in a positive thing with camaraderie, identity, company pride," Rice. "It can also go a step too far and some of the positive aspects can be lost ... you never want to see it become elitist or exclusionary."

The Orangemen have adopted many firefighting traditions and principles from East Coast fire departments, such as in New York.

"There's a certain professional aura about those departments, and they have traditions that are hundreds of years old," Rice said.

Although Sacramento doesn't have the number of fires of such cities, Station 6 firefighters respond to more calls than most stations. As a result, firefighters who choose to be there tend to be very aggressive and hard-charging firefighters, Rice said.

The Orangemen publish a newsletter, Orange Peel, posted at www.sfd6.homestead.com.

Several Orangemen have been transferred in what fire officials termed a "cooling-off period."

Hammond, who has spent time at Station 6, expressed frustration with the problems there.

"I am generally disappointed in Fire Department management," Hammond said, "and I am truly disappointed in the Orangemen."