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Ex-firefighter awarded \$1.7 million

Jury finds the city retaliated against him for helping a colleague who alleged bias.

By Steve Hymon
Times Staff Writer

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A Los Angeles jury awarded \$1.7 million Friday to a former Los Angeles firefighter who alleged that he was retaliated against for helping a colleague who had alleged racial, sexual and sexual orientation discrimination.

It was the latest development in a series of discrimination allegations against the Fire Department that led to the resignation of Chief William Bamattre in December.

In the verdict Friday, Lewis "Steve" Bressler received \$1.3 million for lost wages and \$405,000 for emotional duress.

He was one of three firefighters who worked together in 2001 at Station 96 in Chatsworth and together sued the city in 2005.

Bressler alleged that he had been discriminated against for his age and his Jehovah's Witness religion, and that his pleas to help colleague Brenda Lee — a black lesbian who also alleged discrimination — were shunned by the department and led to his forced retirement in 2005 at age 65.

The religious-discrimination aspect of the case did not go to trial, and the jury ruled against Bressler on his allegation of age discrimination.

A judge may later determine whether the city will have to pay several hundred thousand dollars more in attorney fees.

Another plaintiff in the case, Gary Mellinger, settled his part of the case with the city for \$350,000 in November after a jury found in his favor. He, too, had alleged retaliation for helping Lee.

A trial date for Lee's suit has not been set. Among her allegations are that she was retaliated against for complaining about discrimination and was later declared unfit for duty by the department.

"Two juries have heard two cases arising from the same evidence, and both times they have found for the plaintiff," said Genie Harrison, an attorney for Bressler.

Harrison is also representing Lee, as well as Tennie Pierce, a black firefighter who alleged in a separate lawsuit that he was fed a meal laced with dog food in 2004 as part of a racial stunt at a Westchester fire station.

"The city attorney's office is disappointed in the verdict, and we're reviewing the trial records and considering our options," said spokesman Nick Velasquez. "We engaged in settlement discussions prior to trial, but the parties were too far apart."

The City Council last year approved a \$2.7-million settlement with Pierce, but it was vetoed by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa after photos emerged in the media of Pierce involved in firehouse pranks.

A subsequent effort by the council to override the veto fell short in November despite a personal plea by Pierce before the council. Pierce's case is scheduled to go to trial in September.

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steve.hymon@latimes.com

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