

Feds find L.A. Fire Department violated civil rights laws

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The Los Angeles Fire Department has violated civil rights laws by allowing harassment and retaliation of female and African-American firefighters, federal investigators have found.

In a decision released today after an investigation, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission found that the LAFD allowed a "pattern and practice" of different terms of employment, harassment and retaliation for a class of female and black firefighters.

The investigation stems from at least two complaints filed by firefighters.

The EEOC would not comment on the LAFD, but the decision triggers settlement discussions between the city and attorneys for the firefighters who filed claims.

If the city does not agree to make changes in the department to resolve the civil rights issues, the EEOC could pass along the case to the Department of Justice for prosecution.

LAFD Chief Douglas Barry said he received the EEOC complaint Tuesday morning, and had not had a chance to review it, but would and also would seek follow-up information.

"I think it points to the reforms that we're working on, that we've been talking about; it points toward the importance of getting the reforms in place," Barry said following a fire commission meeting.

The new chief earlier had announced a plan to reform the beleaguered department, including asking for between \$2 million and \$3 million to create a Professional Standards Division of about 20 people to improve discipline management.

Currently it has two investigators for the nearly 3,600-sworn force.

Commission President Genethia Hudley-Hayes said it would be up to management and the City Attorney's Office to come up with a strategy for dealing with the EEOC issue.

"We're taking all of this seriously."

And while she said the board would have input into the decision, she said it was premature to comment.

"I think it's inappropriate and really dangerous to respond to anything and make statements without being prepped by the City Attorney's Office until we're clear about the message."

She added, "All the things that we are addressing now, this is not something that happened yesterday or six months ago. This is something that happened preceding the Personnel and Controller's audits."

The commission is now trying to put into place programs to train people in leadership on workplace issues.

Councilman Dennis Zine, who heads the City Council's Personnel Committee, said the LAFD has cracked down on hazing and horseplay that led to some of the complaints by female and black firefighters.

"This is not the same environment as it was years ago. The fire department has been clear direction that that behavior will cease," Zine said.

"If they're still having problems then the command stil hasn't gotten the message. If discipline or termination is needed to save taxpayers money and send a message, then maybe that's what needs to happen."

Also on today, the City Council finalized the settlement with black firefighter Tennie Pierce, whose colleagues put dog food in his spaghetti. The city will pay \$1,430,000 to settle Pierce's racial discrimination and retaliation lawsuit, plus \$60,000 in back pay so he can receive his 20-year pension.

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