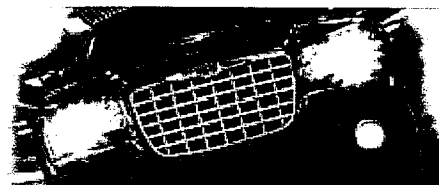


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L.A. Fire Captain Alleges Discrimination

Alicia Mathis takes the first step toward a class-action suit, saying she and other female firefighters continue to be treated poorly.

By Lisa Richardson

Times Staff Writer

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A Los Angeles fire captain has set in motion what would be the first class-action lawsuit against the department on behalf of female firefighters.

Capt. Alicia Mathis, a 17-year veteran, announced Wednesday on the steps of City Hall that she has filed a complaint with the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing alleging gender discrimination, hostile work environment, harassment and retaliation. The complaint is an administrative prerequisite to a class-action suit.

The move ratchets up the pressure on the Los Angeles Fire Department, which only months ago was the subject of a scathing audit that found it to have long-standing problems with racism and sexism. That audit, commissioned by City Controller Laura Chick, was based on a survey of new recruits and minority and female firefighters at the department.

"How pitiful if a class-action suit is what it takes to bring about changes that should have happened over a decade ago. It shouldn't have to come to this," Chick said in statement. "Why does the city have to keep learning the same painful lessons over and over again? It's 2006 and the city shouldn't have to be sued to get us to treat women employees equally, fairly and respectfully."

Fire Chief William Bamattre could not be reached for comment.

With her husband and children, other firefighters and her attorney behind her, Mathis told of her experiences of having a colleague crawl into her bed at night and try to kiss her, and of being passed over for a transfer in favor of a man who was less qualified. She also told of other women who were drilled to the point at which they suffered injuries, and of women fearing to speak out against the men they rely on while doing their jobs.

Retaliation is such a part of Fire Department culture, Mathis said, that her decision to go public with her complaint is "potentially a career-ending" move.

But the stories of abuse she heard from other women led her to become the public face of female firefighters, she said.

"It is the tears of my fellow women firefighters, who are the strongest and most capable women I know," that led to this decision, Mathis said.

Until now, black firefighters have been the most vocal about discrimination at the department. Several were present Wednesday.

"It took a lot of courage for her to step forward like this and she has my support 100%," said Capt. Jerry Thomas, a vocal critic of the department. "I've been fighting racism and sexism in this department for 31 years — the system is broken."

Mathis, who has worked at stations in the San Fernando Valley, East Los Angeles and South Los Angeles, is vice president of Los Bomberos, the Latino firefighters association. As such, she participates in meetings with the Fire Department administration, the Fire Commission and a federal mediator to determine how, according to audit recommendations, the department should be overhauled. Mathis is on special assignment involving fire prevention for the department.

Progress is unacceptably slow, she said, and her goal is to prod the city and the department into making substantive and timely changes to the disciplinary process. She hopes a suit will not be necessary.

"However, if the process does not have an acceptable outcome, I am prepared to involve the court system," she said.

In particular, she wants to see the disciplinary process improved. Firefighters now are often punished for the smallest infractions while gross misbehavior receives disproportionately mild discipline, she said. Mathis also said she will be waiting to see if the department implements a tracking system to document the abusive behavior of some members.

Mathis' lawyer, Genie Harrison, blamed Bamattre for permitting a hostile work environment for women and minorities. Bamattre came into office in 1995, after an audit of the department found that it was rife with racist and sexist behavior.

"Eleven years later, two more audits found nothing has changed," Harrison said.

Also Wednesday, the Los Angeles City Council unanimously voted to award a \$320,000 settlement to Firefighter Ruthie Bernal in the sexual harassment and battery case she brought against Capt. Robert Meilleur and the department.

In that suit, Bernal said that Meilleur, who was her supervisor, began telling her he adored her and that her husband couldn't adore her like he could. Bernal wrote to the captain, asking him to stop, telling him that this was the third time she had had to defend herself against firefighters who first were infatuated with her and then treated her harshly for rejecting them.

Meilleur apologized, the suit says, but then days later "began kissing her lips, face and neck and asked her to kiss him back."

The suit also alleges that the Fire Department knew Meilleur had a history of making sexual advances to female employees and did nothing. After her complaint, the suit says, the department conducted an investigation that ended without an interview with the captain, who then retired.

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