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 From the Los Angeles Times

LAFD bias award is huge

Jury has not yet decided punitive damages, which could push the payout to female firefighter above \$6.2 million.

By Jessica Garrison
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In the latest of a series of costly verdicts in discrimination cases against the Los Angeles Fire Department, a jury this week awarded \$6.2 million to a female firefighter who said she was harassed because she is black and a lesbian.

Brenda Lee is due back in court today for the jury to consider punitive damages against her former supervisors. That could result in the city paying her even more money, officials said.

"This verdict is awful... For one case, this is a major hit on the city budget," Councilman Jack Weiss, chairman of the council's Public Safety Committee, said Wednesday. Weiss added, however, that the Fire Department was "under new leadership committed to changing the culture."

"It's beyond anyone's ability to change the past," he said.

Allegations of racial and sexual discrimination have been roiling the department for at least the last two years, prompting former Chief William Bamattre to step down in December.

Also last year, a department audit by City Controller Laura Chick found that 87% of African Americans and nearly 80% of women surveyed said they were aware of or had experienced discrimination.

In the suit filed in 2005, Lee alleged, among other things, that she was retaliated against for complaining about discrimination and was later declared unfit for duty by the department.

Jonathan Diamond, a spokesman for City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo, said Wednesday that lawyers for the city were reviewing their options in the Lee verdict.

In related cases, two other firefighters who worked with Lee at Station 96 in Chatsworth have won awards in lawsuits contending they suffered retaliation for supporting her.

Lewis "Steve" Bressler was awarded \$1.7 million by a jury in April. Gary Mellinger settled his part of the case with the city in November for \$350,000.

In addition, last September, firefighter Ruthie Bernal was paid \$320,000 by the city to settle a sexual harassment and battery lawsuit, in which she alleged that her captain made continual sexual requests, tried to kiss her and treated her harshly when she rejected him.

The highest-profile trial is yet to come.

Tennie Pierce, a department veteran, filed suit after firefighters at his Westchester station mixed dog food into his spaghetti in 2004.

Council members initially voted to pay Pierce a \$2.7-million settlement — the largest in Fire Department history. But Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa vetoed the move after a public outcry and the appearance of photos of Pierce participating in hazing rituals of other firefighters.

Still, the incident — and the issue of discrimination in the department — led to Bamattre's resignation. Veteran Firefighter Douglas L. Barry was named acting chief, the first African American in the department's history to assume the top job.

Pierce's case could go to trial later this year.

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