

Jury backs public safety officers in race-bias suit

By Michelle Rester
STAFF WRITER

Los Angeles County police officers have been racially discriminated against and their salaries and benefits need to be increased to equal that of their counterparts in the Sheriff's Department, a Superior Court jury has found.

The 12-member group said earlier this week it agreed with the 500-plus officers of the Los Angeles County Office of Public Safety, who sued the county and Sheriff's Department.

The sworn law enforcement officers patrol county buildings, hospitals and parks, like Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas and Whittier Narrows Recreation Area.

They allege the county has been paying them significantly lower salaries and giving fewer benefits than it does the sheriff's deputies. And they believe the reason is race related, given that more than half of the county police officers are minorities, officials said.

County officials deny race played any role in the determination of salaries and say they may appeal the decision. This depends on the outcome of the damages and remedies phase of the trial with the judge, which will begin Monday.

The county could be responsible for as much as \$100 million

in back pay and enhanced benefits since 1996, according to the lawsuit.

"We believe that the Appellate Court will reverse the ruling because we're talking about apples and oranges and the jury erred," Supervisor Michael Antonovich said.

Antonovich said the Sheriff's Department and the public safety officers each have their own unions that negotiate salaries. Both groups may be sworn peace officers, but their responsibilities differ, and so obviously has their pay.

"The Office of Public Safety has different qualifications, training and patrol assignments than the men and women in the L.A. County Sheriff's Department," Antonovich said. "I should also say that there is no basis of racial discrimination in the hiring."

County police officials did not return calls for comment. A 33-year veteran officer, however, said he was thrilled with the ruling. As an African-American man, he believes he and his colleagues have been held back because of their race.

If the judge awards the officers as much pay and increased benefits as they've asked, it could mean about a 40-percent increase in pay for Officer Alan Johnson.

"Oh my God, it's going to be about \$1,500 more a month," said Johnson, who patrols the

welfare office in Rosemead and whose day often includes being the first on the scene to nearby traffic accidents and in welfare fraud-related arrests. "I'm so excited about this, I could hardly sleep last night."

County officials said they were not sure where the county would find the money for the possible settlement. The county's attorney said he is never surprised at what juries can come up with, but thinks this latest decision was a mistake.

"I think it's wrong and so in that sense I'm surprised," said Calvin House, an attorney with the Pasadena-based law firm of Gutierrez, Preciado and House. "I didn't understand how they could think the officers were racially discriminated against."

The Office of Public Safety, which has also been called Park Police or county police officers, began as security guards in the early 1900s.

The Board of Supervisors adopted the group as its latest name in January 1996.

The officers now police 126 parks in a 4,000-square-mile area. They also provide security to some county buildings and health centers, carry guns, have patrol responsibilities, make arrests and book people.

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