

April 29, 1997

7 Sue, Claim Bosses Retaliated -- Housing Authority Workers Say They Blew Whistle

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Seven current and former staffers are suing the King County Housing Authority, saying they were punished for blowing the whistle on agency officials for a wide range of abuses.

Complaints by the employees led to a federal investigation last year. The investigation found that officials had misused staff and equipment for personal projects and had falsified time sheets.

A separate investigation by The Seattle Times, published before the federal findings were released, found similar abuses as well as widespread nepotism and favoritism within the agency.

The findings prompted the firing of one official and reforms in the agency's hiring, contracting and ethics policies.

But the lawsuit says that behind the scenes, agency officials retaliated against some staff members. Five were demoted and two were pressured to quit, the lawsuit says. The lawsuit, filed in King County Superior Court, asks for lost wages, reinstatement of benefits and pay, compensation for emotional distress and humiliation, and attorney's fees.

"I'm filing this to rectify what I felt was done wrong to me," said Kellie Bronson, a clerk who says she was transferred, isolated and forced out after going to superiors and federal authorities about alleged misconduct by her boss, maintenance supervisor Roy Halverson.

The Housing Authority took no action against Halverson until The Times and federal investigators documented some of the allegations. He then was demoted but allowed to take sick leave and collect a salary until earlier this year, when a new executive director took over the Housing Authority and fired him.

The new executive director, Stephen Norman, said Bronson's claim requires further investigation because she appears to be a whistle-blower and there is no evidence she did anything wrong.

"I've asked for a complete in-house accounting as to what happened with that individual," said Norman, who was hired at the Housing Authority in January and had no role in last year's scandal.

The former executive director, Jim Wiley, had presided over the Housing Authority for 23 years, during which time many of his friends and family members were hired. Wiley retired late last year.

Norman said the six other complainants in the lawsuit - Jeannette Hill, Roger Barry, Kevin Barber, Jerry Hopkins, Bill Noble and Steve Kesling - are disgruntled employees whose claims seem meritless. He said the six were disciplined this year for being absent without leave during working hours, playing darts and watching television in the office rather than working, sleeping on the job and using Housing Authority tools for personal purposes.

He said they were investigated last year by four Housing Authority managers, including the deputy director, after a complaint was lodged against them by one of their co-workers. The employees were demoted and lost about a dollar an hour in pay, Norman said. "This was not extensive abuse," he said.

Norman said he doesn't believe the six are whistle-blowers like Bronson, but he acknowledged he wasn't here at the time.

Norman wasn't aware, however, that Barber and Kesling had gone to federal investigators with information about wrongdoing at the Housing Authority more than a year ago. He knew officials from the inspector general's office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) had interviewed Barber, but he said the transcript of that interview contained comments he considered to be innocuous.

Kesling, a groundsman at the Housing Authority, said he and Barber went to HUD officials, along with Bronson, to report illegal activities at the Housing Authority and "we stayed in contact with them during the length of their investigation."

Barber said there is no question the disciplinary action was related to the employees' efforts to help investigators. Barber resigned his job as a maintenance supervisor rather than accept the discipline and is now self-employed.

Norman said even if the six were whistle-blowers, he would need proof Housing Authority managers knew about it and took action against them as a result.

Officials with the HUD inspector general's office were not available for comment.