

Former Housing Employees Sue Their Ex-Bosses -- Whistle-Blowers Claim Retaliation

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In 1995, seven employees of the King County agency responsible for running public housing began noticing shady dealings. They reported those dealings to federal Department of Housing and Urban Development investigators, who found widespread abuses in the King County Housing Authority.

Those abuses were reported in a series of articles in *The Seattle Times* that year, and the agency's 23-year executive director, Jim Wiley, stepped down.

But a lawsuit now claims that before he left, Wiley and his lieutenants carried out a vendetta against the whistle-blowers. The employees, in a King County Superior Court suit against the Housing Authority, say they were either forced to quit or were otherwise punished when wind of the HUD investigation got to Wiley.

"This is a case about revenge. It's about retaliation. It's about six public employees punished because they reported their employees' wrongdoing to a federal agency," said one of the workers' attorneys, Eric Heipt.

One of the employees settled with the county for undisclosed terms earlier this year, leaving six plaintiffs in the case.

"After they participated in the investigation, they were forced out, their pay was cut and they were harassed," said Edwin Budge, another of their attorneys. "We're alleging their constitutional free speech was violated."

The suit was filed April 25, 1997. The workers are seeking an unspecified amount in lost wages and punitive damages.

But Tammy Roe, representing the Housing Authority, said the workers were fired, demoted or had their pay cut because an internal investigation prompted by co-workers' complaints found the whistle-blowers sometimes played darts and did personal projects on the job.

"This case has nothing to do about whistle-blowers . . . The plaintiffs weren't doing their jobs," she said.

Roe said housing authorities didn't know the whistle-blowers had cooperated in HUD's investigation when they punished them. But Heipt said that in a work meeting Wiley referred to one of the plaintiffs and others as "Kellie Bronson and her band of idiots."

The plaintiffs - Bronson, who settled out of court, Jeanette Hill, Roger Barry, Kevin Barber, Jerry Hopkins, Bill Noble and Steve Kesling - worked in the Housing Authority's maintenance division.

The HUD and *Times*' investigations found cases of nepotism and that supervisors were falsifying time sheets to bill taxpayers for time not worked and using public supplies, employees and equipment to install a swimming pool in a top official's back yard.