

## Housing Authority didn't protect rights of workers, jury finds

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A King County Superior Court jury on Monday found that the King County Housing Authority ignored six workers' free speech rights and failed to protect them when they complained about wrongdoing within the agency.

Jurors will determine Tuesday whether damages should be levied against the agency.

The workers are seeking back pay, along with damages for future economic loss and emotional distress.

Kim VonHenkle, spokeswoman for the Housing Authority, said she couldn't comment because the trial is under way. Edwin Budge and Erik Heipt, the attorneys representing the workers, also did not comment.

The six employees, who reported problems within the agency to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, said they were either forced to quit or were demoted as a result of their complaints.

The agency, the second largest housing authority in the Northwest, is responsible for 10,000 housing units.

The housing authority has received federal honors for innovation and the appearance of its facilities. But its practices came under criticism several years ago after public reports of misuse of agency employees and equipment.

During the trial, the jury learned about abuses that included a manager who used agency employees and materials to put a swimming pool in his yard.

The workers, Roger Barry, Kevin Barber, Jeanette Hill, Jerry Hopkins, Bill Noble and Steve Kesling, worked in the agency's northend shop. Barber, who supervised the others, was forced to leave the agency, according to the suit. The other four still work there.