
Housing whistle-blowers win suit over retaliation

County agency violated workers' rights

BY KERY MURAKAMI
Seattle Times staff reporter

In 1995, months after they blew the whistle on shady dealings at the King County Housing Authority, seven workers felt the wrath of the agency's top managers. One was forced out of the housing authority, the others demoted in a campaign of retaliation.

Yesterday, the workers were vindicated by a King County Superior Court jury. In deciding a civil suit filed by the workers, jurors said the housing authority violated their free-speech rights. They also found that the agency breached its contract with the workers by violating whistle-blowing protections spelled out in the employees' handbook.

The award will be decided after a hearing next Tuesday. Edwin Budge,

an attorney for one of the workers, said they want back pay and benefits, plus punitive damages.

The housing authority, responsible for running public housing, had no immediate response yesterday.

"They really put these people through hell," said another of the workers' lawyers, Erik Heipt.

The workers said they were either pushed out, demoted or their pay was cut within months after going to federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) investigators to report improper activities by top officials. The complaints led to findings of widespread abuses in investigations by HUD and The Seattle Times, and the agency's 23-year executive director, Jim Wiley, stepped down.

HUD and The Times found cases

of nepotism and showed that supervisors falsified time sheets to bill taxpayers for time not worked and used public supplies, employees and equipment to install a swimming pool in a top official's back yard.

Heipt had told jurors, "This is a case about revenge. It's about retaliation."

Tammy Roe, representing the housing authority, said the workers were punished because the whistle-blowers sometimes played darts and did personal projects on the job.

The workers — Jeanette Hill, Roger Barry, Kevin Barber, Jerry Hopkins, Bill Noble and Steve Kesling — worked in the housing authority's maintenance division. A seventh whistle-blower, Kellie Bronson, settled out of court.

Kery Murakami's phone message number is 206-464-2775. His e-mail: kmurakami@seattletimes.com
