

Medic's attorney asks for damages

By Marylyne Pitz
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After April Sliško's supervisors told her women are only worth the sex acts they can perform, the city paramedic asked for an apology.

Yesterday, Attorney Samuel J. Cordes asked the city human relations commission to award Sliško \$11,243 in back overtime pay and an unspecified amount of damages, saying she endured "hell for 10 months."

Last month, the commission upheld Sliško's sexual harassment complaint, which was the subject of public hearings in July.

The commission found that women at fire station No. 36 in Brighton Heights had been subjected to "sexually-related name

calling, leering with vulgar comment, openly displayed pornographic videos, sexually based ridicule, intimidation and dirty pranks."

The commission also ruled that four city officials, including Fire Chief Charles Dickinson and Robert Kennedy, chief of Emergency Medical Services, were "derelict" because they did nothing about Sliško's complaint for a year, then reported it to the Office of Municipal Investigations.

The two commissioners who made the ruling, Pamela Golden and the Rev. Lou Vallone, took additional testimony yesterday on damages.

Cordes asked the commission to appoint an independent auditor to visit city fire stations to ensure that managers and employees com-

plied with the city's policy prohibiting sexual harassment.

Cordes asked for an unspecified amount of damages for Sliško, who was forced to transfer to a Shady-side fire station in 1993. The transfer forced Sliško to give up the seniority that went with her job in Brighton Heights. Cordes is also seeking legal fees of \$15,000.

Fire station 36, Cordes claimed, "had an atmosphere that is as detrimental as having a sign that says women are not allowed here."

"The firefighters told April that women belong in the home and the kitchen and mainly in the bedroom," Cordes said.

As none of Sliško's supervisors have been disciplined, Cordes said, "that is the message being sent to all the women in the Public Safety Department."

In 1992, Sliško complained because firefighters watched pornographic videos and asked her if she could perform certain sex acts.

Since she complained, Sliško said, her former supervisors have tried to cast her in two starkly different roles.

"When I started complaining, they said I was a prude who couldn't take a joke. During the hearings, they tried to paint me as a tattooed, promiscuous slut," Sliško said, adding that she does not have a tattoo.

Sliško testified yesterday that she passed up chances to work overtime each week because of the hostility and tension in the firehouse. After she complained, her locker was padlocked three times and each time she had to remove it with bolt cutters.

Chief Kennedy testified yesterday that none of the firefighters, paramedics had received training regarding sexual harassment, as Kennedy said there was no need for such training.

Kennedy also testified that one has been disciplined at Fire Station 36.

After yesterday's hearing, Sliško recalled that initially she had requested a verbal apology from Mark Larkin, a paramedic crew chief, and fire captain Paul Trpic.

"They laughed," Sliško said, recalling that Trpic told her "All you need is a good hard man to make you stop complaining."

Neither Larkin nor Trpic could be reached for comment.

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William Sera, former director of management and development in human resources at H.J. Heinz Co., testified on Sliško's behalf.

City officials, Sera said, waited "far too long" to respond to Sliško's complaint and when they did, their response was "inadequate."

The city, Sera said, needed a sexual harassment policy that is "monitored and enforced."

In addition, the commission should appoint an independent monitor who is not affiliated with the Public Safety Department, Sera said. The monitor would regularly visit city fire stations to see if the policy is being enforced, Sera added.

When assistant city solicitor Marianne S. Malloy asked Sera why the monitor was necessary, he replied, "To make sure it gets done."

Barbara Pares, the city's personnel director and director of its civil and service commission, testified that in 1994, city managers received updated copies of the sexual harassment policy.

"You've been here three years and you've never gone to a station house to see if it's being complied with?" Cordes asked.

"That's correct," Pares replied.

Margaret McCormick Barron, a spokeswoman for Mayor Murphy, said yesterday the city would appeal to Allegheny County Common Pleas Court.



John Beale/Post-Gazette

Paramedic April Sliško waits for yesterday's hearing to begin.

"It is our view that the process was flawed. The city Human Relations Commission did not adequately take into account all sides of this case. It is our objective to get to a fair forum where the entire story can be heard," Barron said.

Malloy said yesterday that the men Sliško accused of harassment were denied their constitutional right to confront their accuser.

"Miss Sliško made charges against specific people. Those people have never been allowed to hear what she said they did," Malloy said. Witnesses were se-

questered during the hearings last summer.

In addition, Malloy said, the commission "essentially ignored the testimony of at least 15 witnesses who testified on behalf of the city."

Thirdly, Malloy said, the commission was incorrect in applying the legal standard.

"This was not an environment so hostile that no reasonable woman could be expected to work there. That is why we are now in the process of trying to get a fair forum," Malloy said.