

NEWS

Fired officer suing for police records

He accused co-workers of sex with minors

BY RICHARD COLE
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

An East Palo Alto policeman who claims he was fired for reporting that fellow officers were having sex with underage girls in their patrol cars is now demanding department records.

Kenneth Cassettari was dismissed in May 2001 on charges he had manhandled suspects. But in a July 2002 lawsuit filed against the city and Police Chief Wesley Bowling, Cassettari claimed those charges were false and that his firing came in retaliation for whistle-blowing.

"He brought these allegations against these officers to light — basically statutory rape — and a month later he was fired," Cassettari's attorney Steve Phillips said.

Efforts to mediate the lawsuit failed last week. His client will now ask for internal police department records they contend will support Cassettari's accusations.

"We want to know what they did — whether they investigated, whether they swept them under the rug," Phillips said. "They're not giving us those records, so we are going into court to get them."

East Palo Alto City Attorney Michael Lawson said he could not comment directly on the settlement discussions because they are confidential. But he said the department had looked into the ex-officer's charges.

"Mr. Cassettari's allegations were investigated," Lawson said. "The substance of the investigation and the conclusions are confidential because they involve the officers' personnel files."

He refused to say whether any officers had been fired or disciplined as a result of the investigation.

According to Cassettari's lawsuit, the new officer had problems with the East Palo Alto Police Department's casual standards from the time he was hired in September 2000.

Cassettari said he once found a gram of black tar heroin in a gazebo at Bell Street Park and put it into an envelope to book into police property for destruction.

But his training officer ordered him to throw it away in a parking lot Dumpster, and Cassettari complained, receiving a new training officer.

Female informant

The more serious charges arose in March 2001, the lawsuit said, when Cassettari heard about the sex accusations from a female informant in a robbery case.

"The misconduct reported by the informant involved allegations that the police officers were having sex in their patrol cars with minors and other women while on duty," the lawsuit said. "(The informant) claimed to have personally witnessed some of these acts."

When Cassettari brought the charges to Sgt. Tom Alipio and the chief, they took the woman to the Palo Alto Golf Course for questioning, according to the lawsuit. "Chief Bowling later told (Cassettari) that he believed the informant," the lawsuit states.

Cassettari said he immediately became the target of harassment by other officers, including receiving "phone calls from other officers telling (him) to watch his back, that everyone thought he was a snitch, that he could not be trusted."

He then suffered a series of petty harassments, including vandalizing his clipboard, soaking his ticket book in water and having his checkbook stolen from the police locker room, according to the lawsuit.

Without any notice or hearing, the lawsuit said, he received a letter from Bowling firing him on May 18, 2001.

The San Mateo County Superior Court lawsuit names as defendants the city, Bowling, Lt. Roderick Norris, Lt. Rahn Sibley and former City Manager Monika Hudson.