

Hechinger faces 2nd suit alleging discrimination

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Body

Hechinger Co., the state's biggest chain of home improvement stores, has been hit with a discrimination lawsuit that claims black and older managers were swept out of the company as Hechinger converted its traditional warehouse stores to more modern "Home Project Centers" during the early 1990s.

Landover-based Hechinger strongly denied the claims in the lawsuit, which named Chief Executive Officer John Hechinger Jr. and the vice president for store operations, Gary Mercer, as individual defendants.

The complaint, filed Oct. 26, follows a March lawsuit alleging age discrimination as part of the same restructuring.

Together, the two suits ask for \$ 250 million in punitive damages. The race discrimination suit claims that more than 100 workers may be eligible to join the suit; the age case does not estimate the number of affected workers or ex-employees.

John Hermina, a Laurel attorney representing 14 black plaintiffs in the class-action case, said Hechinger decided that Home Project Centers would have a younger, whiter clientele than its former stores and wanted employees to match.

Jay S. Berke, a New York attorney representing Hechinger, said the company believes it will be vindicated when the case is heard by the U.S. District Court in Greenbelt.

"Anyone familiar with the reputation and record of the Hechinger family should not be swayed by either of these claims," said Mr. Berke, who works for the firm of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.

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