

*Suit blames Bell Atlantic in 3 employees' suicides; Racially hostile environment alleged;
The workplace*

THE BALTIMORE SUN
May 11, 1999, Tuesday, ,FINAL

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Section: BUSINESS

Length: 316 words

Body

PHILADELPHIA -- A group of current and former employees of Bell Atlantic Corp. filed a \$100 million federal lawsuit against the company yesterday, charging that a racially hostile environment led to the suicides of three employees who worked at a company garage.

The lawsuit, filed in U. S. District Court in Philadelphia, claims that company executives did not do enough to stem the discrimination alleged by 10 plaintiffs on the part of two supervisors at the garage where the suicide victims worked.

ASSOCIATED PRESSThe workers, all black men, died between 1994 and 1997.

The alleged harassment by white supervisors Thomas Flaherty and Nick Pomponio was so harsh that some workers considered "taking the law into their own hands," the lawsuit said.

"But they opted to endure the suffering instead, believing that Bell Atlantic would take the action it promised to take to investigate complaints and take corrective action ," court documents said.

Flaherty and Pomponio have since been transferred out of the garage, plaintiffs' attorney John Hermina said. Flaherty, reached by phone, referred comment to corporate attorneys.

Joan Rasmussen, a Bell Atlantic spokeswoman in Arlington, Va., said Hermina had filed a similar lawsuit in federal court in Washington seeking class action status, but a judge "denied their plaintiffs' claim of a pattern of discrimination."

She declined to comment specifically on the Philadelphia lawsuit because she had not seen it, but said, "Discrimination is totally unacceptable in the workplace at Bell Atlantic."

The lawsuit charges the company with racial discrimination and retaliation, negligence, breach of contract, and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

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"Bell Atlantic knew this was going on," Hermina said. "It's a culture of neglect, because apparently Bell Atlantic felt that these African-American employees don't matter."

Load-Date: May 12, 1999

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