

Army lab charged with sexual, racial bias; Suit says supervisors harassed workers at Adelphi research site

The Baltimore Sun

December 13, 1995, Wednesday,, FINAL EDITION

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Section: LOCAL (NEWS),

Length: 656 words

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Body

In a complaint claiming widespread racial discrimination and sexual harassment at the Army Research Laboratory in Adelphi, more than a dozen employees have filed a class action lawsuit seeking damages in U.S. District Court in Baltimore.

The employees -- including secretaries, program analysts and an administrative officer -- say supervisors harassed even high school students working in a vocational program at the lab, located near College Park in Prince George's County.

The lawsuit claims the employees dealt with sexual innuendo, touching and grabbing on a daily basis.

In one instance, a supervisor dropped his pen down the blouse of a female student, then reached inside to retrieve it, according to the suit.

Jennifer Murphy, a program analyst, told how her boss once ran his fingers up her leg to point out a run in her stocking. Another time he grabbed her buttocks on the pretense of noticing a spot on her dress, she said.

"The environment was very, very difficult," said Ms. Murphy, who has been with the lab since 1974. "Management refused to take any action. As females, what we said had no validity.

"I complained several times to managers. One supervisor specifically said, 'I don't want to hear it.'"

Female and minority employees said they were routinely passed over for promotions in favor of male and Caucasian employees with less training and education. African-American employees -- male and female -- were referred to as "pygmy" and "buckwheat," according to the complaint.

Supervisors retaliated with firing, demotion or critical performance reviews against those who complained, employees said.

"It's been going on for a long time -- for years," said [See Suit, 2B]

John Hermina, a lawyer for the employees. "Some of the plaintiffs would tell you it was a living hell for them to go to work in this kind of environment, a daily hell."

Of the 16 complainants, several are former employees. Thirteen are women and three are men. All the women, most of them African-American, complained of sexual harassment or working in an environment of sexual harassment. Some of the women also charged racial discrimination.

All three African-American men complained of racial discrimination; one of them also complained of retaliation against him for supporting female colleagues who charged sexual harassment.

Besides Togo West Jr., secretary of the Army, the suit names Dr. John Lyons, lab director who employees say failed to take appropriate action on numerous complaints, and Dr. Alan Goldman, chief of the technology information transfer division, who is accused of repeated sexual harassment toward several women.

But the allegations are directed at numerous supervisors who are accused of either direct involvement in harassment and discrimination, or of looking the other way.

Officials at the lab yesterday had not seen the suit and would not comment about specific allegations. The lab employs about 2,600 people and provides the Army with key technology and analytical support for future warfare.

"The leadership of the ARL is concerned about any issues that affect the work force," spokesman David Davison said. "They've looked into these complaints and feel that we've followed the proper procedures. Dr. Lyons has made it known that it is his intent to have a fair and equitable work environment for all employees."

Employees said that early last year, in response to the complaints, officials ordered Dr. Goldman to receive counseling, after which he issued a letter to several female workers saying he was sorry if he had offended them.

Dr. Lyons and Dr. Goldman were not at the lab yesterday and efforts to reach them were unsuccessful.

According to the lawsuit, only 53 of the lab's employees are African-American, and 24 of those are female. The lab was unable to identify the number of minorities on staff when asked for that information yesterday.

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Load-Date: December 14, 1995

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