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## Bell Atlantic is accused of racism

Ten current and former workers are suing. They say conditions led to two supervisors' suicides.

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Ten current or former employees of Bell Atlantic Corp. have sued the company in federal court, contending that race harassment at a company garage in North Philadelphia was so bad it contributed to the suicides of two African American supervisors and the death of a third.

According to the lawsuit filed Friday in U.S. District Court here, two white managers at the Bell Atlantic garage at Second Street and Erie Avenue "practiced racism openly" between 1994 and 1997.

The two white managers addressed African Americans as "you people," and used racially derogatory terms, condoned racial harassment in the workplace, and pressured black supervisors to discipline more black workers, the lawsuit contends.

The lawsuit also maintains that white supervisors followed African American employees to hospitals "purportedly because they did not believe their reasons for not being at work."

The suit, filed on behalf of eight Philadelphia residents, a Yeadon resident and a Roslyn resident, seeks court orders barring racist activities by Bell Atlantic employees, unspecified compensatory damages and punitive damages of \$100 million.

Bell Atlantic spokeswoman Joan Rasmussen said yesterday that company officials investigated the suicides and the death of the African American supervisors — all of whom worked at the Second and Erie garage — "long prior to these lawsuits being filed."

The lawsuit said the third man died "as a result of this enormously hostile environment," but did not say how the death occurred.

Rasmussen said the company brought psychologists and counselors to the facility to interview and counsel coworkers of the three men "but we could find no evidence that these suicides were caused by discrimination... or anything connected to work."

She said the deaths did not occur when all three men were working simultaneously at the garage. One occurred after the person left Bell Atlantic, she said.

Rasmussen said it was "regrettable that someone is making use of a tragic situation such as this" and added that Bell Atlantic "takes this very seriously. Discrimination is completely unacceptable."

She added that the company recently fired three people for sending racist e-mail messages.

John W. Hermina, the Maryland lawyer who filed the lawsuit on behalf of the 10 people, declined to elaborate on the lawsuit.

The lawsuit is an outgrowth of a proposed \$500 million class-action lawsuit Hermina filed in 1996 in Washington against Bell Atlantic on behalf of 48 current and former African American Bell employees.

Last month, U.S. District Judge Ricardo M. Urbina in Washington denied the request for class certification of the 1996 lawsuit, meaning that the claims must be individually litigated. The Philadelphia suit is one of those individual claims.

North — R3