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Female firefighters win discrimination suit

August 16th, 2013, 3:07 pm · View comments · posted by TONY SAAVEDRA

Long Beach retrofitting 24 stations with separate bathrooms.

Ohh 43

For decades, female firefighters in **Long Beach** had to change in hallways and use portable toilets outside the station because the city refused to provide the women with their own facilities – until engineer **Karen Rindone** made a federal case out of it.

Exhibit 1: Firefighter **Denise Root** regularly used the bathroom at a local gas station because the one at the fire station was unavailable.

Exhibit 2: Firefighter **Charise Sherratt** had to wait, sometimes covered in grime or chemicals from a call, for the men to shower before she could clean up.

“I, like almost every other female firefighter in Long Beach, have been walked in on when I was naked,” said Sherratt in a court declaration for a federal lawsuit. “Not only was the experience humiliating, but for several years later, men would approach me to discuss the incident.”

Meanwhile, private bedrooms and bathrooms for captains were built at one station.

“The disparities in facilities ... discourage other women firefighters from applying to work as Long Beach firefighters,” said Rindone’s federal suit. “The city has singled out women to be a problem because of their sex, created an environment that fosters hostility and does not place men and women on equal footing.”

“It was really, really bad,” attorney **Kathleen Hartman** said of the less-than-private conditions for her clients. “They (the city) were saying they don’t have the money to make renovations when in fact they do.”

Long Beach Fire Chief **Mike DuRee** declined to discuss the case, referring a reporter to the city attorney’s office. The female firefighters who brought the case also said they could not comment directly for fear of being fired.

But things are getting better.

The city agreed July 19 to retrofit 24 stations with separate facilities for the city’s nine female firefighters. This agreement settles the federal lawsuit as well as a separate state suit brought by Rindone and two other female firefighters alleging sexual discrimination. As part of the settlement, the city will pay **\$48,859** in attorney fees and provide the women with protective gear and uniforms fitted for females.

The female firefighters were often given gloves too big for their hands or ill-fitting coats and turnout pants – lowering the effectiveness of the fireproof clothing, the suit said.

Barry Meyers, senior deputy city attorney, said the city had already been renovating the stations – little by little – but not fast enough for the women. A new station nearing completion in North Long Beach will have separate dorm rooms, each with its own bathroom, he said.

“We don’t feel we were behind the curve at all,” Meyers said. “We had a long-term plan, and we were implementing that plan.”

Despite repeated requests, the city would not disclose how much it is spending on the renovations, which must be ready by late 2015.

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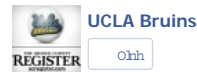
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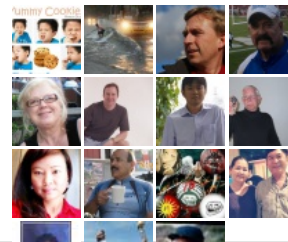
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Court documents filed by the city said that 23 percent of the fire stations have private facilities and dormitories.

"Since 2008, Long Beach Fire Department has made a tremendous effort to improve the living conditions for all fire personnel," city attorneys wrote.

Firefighters, male or female, are expected to work at any station on any day, at the discretion of the chief. It is not uncommon to work 72-hour shifts at different stations, the suit said.

In Orange County, the **Orange County Fire Authority** has long provided separate accommodations for 16 female firefighters at all of its 71 stations, said spokesman Kris Concepcion.

Hartman said the conditions in Long Beach were not as good.

"When I first met my clients, I was shocked at their account of what they had to face just to do their job. I had always just assumed that in this day and age, the women and men firefighters would all have proper gender-appropriate accommodations," she said. "Unfortunately, I was wrong."

Contact the writer: tsaavedra@ocregister.com

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