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Firefighters may sue over pride parade participation

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SAN DIEGO – Four San Diego city firefighters have filed a complaint with the state saying their superiors forced them to participate in last month's gay pride parade, where they became targets of obscene gestures and sexual comments.

An attorney for the four sent a letter to the state Department of Fair Employment and Housing on Aug. 1, requesting the right to file a sexual harassment lawsuit against the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department.

Fire Chief Tracy Jarman issued a statement yesterday saying she apologized to the men and plans to have the city's Equal Employment Investigative Office look into their complaints.

Fire Capt. John Ghiotto, Engineer Jason Hewett and firefighters Chad Allison and Alex Kane said they had objected to driving a city firetruck in the July 21 parade on duty, but were ordered to do so to avoid disciplinary action.

"They were getting nowhere through regular channels," said their attorney, Charles LiMandri, West Coast director of the Thomas More Law Center.

The Thomas More center, based in Ann Arbor, Mich., is described on its Web site as a nonprofit public-interest law firm that promotes Christian values and freedoms through litigation and media attention. The center has been involved in the fight against removal of the Mount Soledad cross.

Fire department spokesman Maurice Luque said the fire crew was chosen because its fire Station 5 on Ninth Avenue in Hillcrest is in the community where the parade took place. Luque said another crew had volunteered, but bowed out for personal reasons, including a family death, the day before.

In statements filed with the state, the men said that along the parade route, they were subjected to offensive and lewd comments such as, "You can put out my fire," and saw men blowing kisses at them. Then, they said, they had to endure protesters who yelled at them that homosexuality was a sin. Some comments were too graphic to print.

Jarman, who is a lesbian, said the fire department has participated in community parades and festivals, including 15 years at the gay pride parade, without a sexual harassment complaint.

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