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San Diego Firefighters File Complaint for Being Forced to Attend Gay Pride Parade

Tuesday, August 07, 2007 By Melissa Drosjack FOX NEWS

E-MAIL STORY PRINTER FRIENDLY VERSION

Firefighters run into burning buildings knowing that it's their duty to risk their lives for others and follow orders, but some question if marching in a Gay Pride parade should fall under that solemn oath.

Four San Diego firefighters lashed out last week against the city's fire department with a sexual harassment complaint after being forced to attend the parade in uniform despite objections they made to superiors.

The firefighters claim parade attendees made obscene gestures, uttered inappropriate remarks and displayed lewd behavior that made them uncomfortable. They also demanded a work environment without discrimination and harassment.

The four men allege they were ordered by a battalion chief to attend last month's parade and feared consequences for failure to do so, since refusing to follow a direct order constitutes disciplinary action.

Fire Capt. John Ghiotto, engineer Jason Hewitt and firefighters Chad Allison and Alex Kane filed the complaint, which includes detailed descriptions of their allegations. Their fire station is along the parade route.

"You could not even look at the crowd without getting some type of sexual gesture," Ghiotto said in the complaint. "The experience left me feeling humiliated, embarrassed and offended by this event."

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San Diego fire chief Tracy Jarman, an open lesbian, said she apologized to the men, according to a statement. Jarman said any kind of sexual harassment is "unacceptable, and is never tolerated" in the department.

"I am deeply concerned and troubled by the allegations that have been made. I take them seriously," Jarman said in a statement.

Jarman said she will order the city's Equal Employment Investigative Office to review the complaint.

The complaint is the first filed against her department regarding participation in a parade or festival, Jarman said.

One of the four firefighters defended his decision to file the complaint, saying it is a sexual harassment issue.

"This EEO complaint isn't about homosexuality or gay pride. This has to do with people in the workplace being threatened, sexually harassed, and forced to participate in a parade that isn't like other parades and the behavior that is demonstrated by the public and some of its participants are what are found to be offensive," according to Hewitt's statement in the complaint.

Hewitt described what he saw at the parade.

"While I was sitting there waiting for the parade to start, I felt that I was forced against my will to be at the Gay Pride Parade and forced to see men in tight shorts dancing provocatively and other men kissing and hugging wearing sexually suggestive material on T-shirts with writing 'Girth and Mirth,' 'Suit Up Before You Dive In,' according to the complaint.

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as forced into a situation that would compromise what I hold true and what I believe in, my reputation, my character, my integrity, my morals, and my religion," the complaint says.

The firefighters' lawyer sent a letter to the state Department of Fair Employment and Housing last week, seeking approval to file a sexual harassment lawsuit against the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department.

"The damage has already been done," said Brian Rooney, a spokesman and attorney for the Thomas More Law Center, which is representing the firefighters. "By participating in this parade wearing the uniform, the perception is clear that they support this type of parade and that is not what they want to convey to their community, their wives and children and their churches."

The firefighters want a change in policy so other colleagues won't face the same situation.

Fellow firefighters have commended them for filing the complaint, said Charles LiMandri, the West Coast director of the Thomas More Law Center, a not-for-profit public interest law center, and a San Diego-area attorney.

"They realize that they could be the ones to have to do this. They commended them for their courageous stance," LiMandri said.

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