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SUIT SAYS FEMALE UK POLICE OFFICERS WERE MISTREATED CURRENT, FORMER MEMBERS OF FORCE ALLEGE GENDER BIAS

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Seven female former or current police officers at the University of Kentucky have sued the university and its acting police chief, claiming they ignored reports of persistent gender discrimination.

One woman, Lisa Blankenship, alleges that acting Chief Joe Monroe retaliated against her for filing a report with UK's Office of Institutional Equity and Equal Opportunity by forcing her to return to work from disability leave, even though her return had not been cleared by a doctor. She was subsequently fired after the university was unable to accommodate her temporary disability, the lawsuit alleges. The suit was filed Wednesday in Fayette Circuit Court by Blankenship, Laura Marco, Bobbye Carpenter, Brenda Palmer, Tia Chilton, Gina Wilson and Lori Creech.

A gender discrimination complaint filed with UK's equal opportunity office by the women in February alleges that Monroe created an uncomfortable work environment by discussing his exploits drinking and partying at strip clubs. They said regular participation in these activities was a vehicle for favorable treatment.

The complaint also alleged disparate punishment for men and women and favoritism in job assignments.

University spokesman Jay Blanton said UK does not comment on pending litigation.

The last time UK was searching for a police chief, in the late spring of 2005, Blankenship and Chilton met with university President Lee T. Todd Jr. According to the lawsuit, they told Todd of "numerous instances of mismanagement, abuse of authority and violations of university policy by Monroe, including conduct evincing a discriminatory and stereotypical attitude toward women."

Monroe was a finalist for the job even though he said he was suspended for two days for carelessly firing his gun in the parking lot, the gender discrimination complaint alleges.

The university eventually hired McDonald Vick of North Carolina Central University. Vick resigned in July 2006 after news reports broke that he had paid off a former subordinate at NCCU who claimed he sexually harassed her after the two had an extramarital affair.

UK officials were aware of pending gender discrimination lawsuits against Vick at NCCU, but they've said an executive search firm recommended they not be a factor in his hiring.

About the time of Vick's departure, UK human resources officials interviewed the women about gender discrimination allegedly perpetrated by Ken Clevidence, who retired as assistant vice president for public safety in June.

Clevidence was the de facto police chief from October 2004 until June, with the exception of the five months Vick was chief, according to the lawsuit.

It is not clear whether the university ever followed up with the human resources investigation, and the reports have not been found, said Lexington attorney **Robert Abell**, who is representing the seven women.

"Certainly they are ignoring them," Abell said.

Monroe learned in June of Blankenship and Chilton's 2005 meeting with Todd, the lawsuit alleges. Blankenship was fired on July 18, even though she had warned that she was not ready to return to work and suspected she was being targeted for retaliation, according to the lawsuit.

Wilson, Chilton and Carpenter still work at UK. Marco, Creech and Palmer have either quit, left for new jobs or retired, Abell said.

The lawsuit asks that Blankenship be reinstated. It seeks damages for loss of income and benefits, emotional distress and mental anguish, embarrassment and humiliation. It also seeks punitive damages.

The suit names the UK board of trustees, Monroe, Clevidence and Alexandra Silver McConnell, an administrative staff assistant. The suit alleges that McConnell threatened to file a baseless lawsuit against the women for reporting gender discrimination.

McConnell also depleted Blankenship's vacation time balance by changing her status in a computer record-keeping system, the lawsuit alleges.

In court documents filed in another lawsuit by Stephanie Bastin, a former assistant police chief, the university has said it has no reason to believe McConnell has ever intimidated any employee.

Bastin's lawsuit, filed last year, claims she was forced to leave the department for not persuading an officer to dismiss a citation against a senior school administrator. It also alleges gender discrimination.

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