

Native correctional officer files racial discrimination suit

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ALBANY, N.Y. - Albany County correctional officer Robert Hunter has filed a racial discrimination suit against the Albany County Correctional Facility and Albany County in New York state.

Hunter, 36, is an Abinake from the Odanack reserve in Quebec. He left the reserve in 2000 to seek a better life for himself and his family.

"Not everyone can sustain life on a reservation; I chose to come down here [Albany]."

According to the Albany County Sheriff's Department, the correctional facility is one of the largest county correctional facilities in the state of New York. The facility has a maximum of 1,029 beds, providing custody for local, state and federal prisoners. The current staff of 420 for both sworn officers and civilians maintains the day-to-day operations of the facility. During the past year, over 7,000 prisoners were admitted. The average daily population has exceeded 800 inmates over the past year.

Hunter expected the facility to provide a means to an improved lifestyle. What he didn't expect was the degree of racism he would allegedly experience.

"You wouldn't believe the comments I heard from people. One captain told me that I was an [expletive] scumbag Indian. I said, 'You wouldn't say that on my reservation.' He said, 'No, I would rape me a squaw.' I had to walk away before I did something that I would regret.

"A lot of supervisors gave me their own little pet names like 'Chief skin and bones,' 'Chief two deer [expletive]' or [they would say], 'Why don't you go home to your reservation? Don't your people have casinos?'

"One guy told me, 'Obviously we didn't pass out enough blankets with smallpox because you're still around.' I didn't want to get physical with anybody, because then they win."

Hunter's attorney, Ariel Solomon, a senior associate with Tully Rinckey PLLC, added to the discussion.

"Obviously getting physical was never a consideration. The discourse that has occurred has been fairly outrageous. What's even more outrageous is that there are no internal mechanisms of which to address the issues of the allegations of discrimination, and that it was allowed to continue for an unacceptable amount of time."

There was more than verbal discrimination alleged by Hunter. One morning when Hunter arrived to work, he was handed a poster by a female employee.

"She said, 'I took this down, you have to see it. People are making fun of it.' When I opened it," replied Hunter, "my heart just dropped. I can't believe they went that far."

According to Hunter, employees had taken a poster of American Indians in traditional clothing and written "The Hunter Family" as well as Hunter's first name in black marker.

The discrimination continued, alleged by Hunter, after he was attacked by an inmate. The altercation was captured on video. Hunter explained that the video was not used to prosecute the illegal action of the inmate. Instead, "cowboy and Indian-style" music was set to the video and was shown to other correctional officers as a joke.

"They made a mockery of it. What the inmate did was illegal and they never pressed charges against the guy."

Solomon shared her thoughts on the event.

"I think what is so absurd about this is the fact that the inmate is precluded now from prosecution because they have tampered with the evidence that the attack actually occurred."

After consistent attempts to address the issues of discrimination, Hunter was repeatedly rebuffed.

"I asked for a personal complaint form and the person I asked threatened me that if I went that route, I would need to look out," Hunter added.

"I think that one of the things that make this case so egregious is that Mr. Hunter was very diligent in trying to resolve the matter internally," Solomon concluded. "He filed complaints with his supervisors, he addressed it with his union and it really fell on deaf ears. He was really at a loss on how to pursue it."

"What's shocking is the complete disregard with respect to Mr. Hunter's concerns."

"I'm a fairly good employee," Hunter stated. "When the new recruits came on, I trained them and taught them the stuff they don't learn in the academy. I went there and did my job."

In the midst of seeking answers, Hunter allegedly still continued to receive comments.

"I've heard things like, 'I'm settling my lawsuit for a tipi' kind of stuff. I can no longer go in there. I'm too sick to my stomach."

"I have to say, that this is the caliber of case that I would be truly shocked if the county wasn't amendable to taking a settlement very seriously," Solomon said.

"I'm just trying to get my life back on track," Hunter said. "I just want this to be done and over with."

Attorneys to Albany County as well as officials at the correctional facility were unwilling to offer comments on the matter.