

Correction officer claims discrimination

American Indian man plans to sue Albany County over alleged treatment at jail

By CAROL DeMARE, Staff writer
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COLONIE - An American Indian correction officer intends to sue Albany County, alleging systematic discrimination by co-workers and supervisors, his lawyer said Monday.

Robert Hunter, 36, contends he was the target of derogatory comments and racial slurs for three years at the Albany County jail, and that his supervisors were not only aware but "frequently engaged in" them, his attorney Ariel E. Solomon said.

In one instance, Hunter said, employees at the jail, where he has worked for seven years, put up a poster of American Indians in traditional dress and labeled them with the names of Hunter and his family.

Another time, Hunter claims, a surveillance video was modified to depict Hunter being attacked while cowboys-and-Indians-style theme music played. The video was shown to the staff at training sessions, Solomon said.

"This has been traumatizing not only for me, but for my family," Hunter said in a statement. "It just became too difficult to wake up and go to work each day. I would be sick to my stomach in the morning. There's no justification for the treatment I endured. I'm proud of my heritage."

Sheriff James L. Campbell declined to comment on the litigation. "We'll deal with it in the courts and not in the media," he said.

Hunter, who is on personal leave from his job, hired the Albany firm of Tully Rinckey to pursue his case after attempts to resolve the matter internally were to no avail, his attorney said.

"The fact that administration failed to acknowledge and resolve the issue, in light of Mr. Hunter's repeated requests, demonstrates a complete disregard for employees and civil rights in general," Solomon said.

A complaint was filed with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission late last year, Solomon said. It's been 180 days since then and the law firm is waiting for a right-to-sue letter from EEOC any day, she said.

A lawsuit claiming violation of Hunter's civil rights will then be pursued in federal court, the attorney said.

Meanwhile, in order to preserve Hunter's rights and "keep the doors open," a notice of claim of a possible pending lawsuit was filed with the Albany County clerk's office for a lawsuit in state Supreme Court. But it's more likely the case will be filed in federal court, Solomon said.

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