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Top Stories

Santiago named in harassment lawsuit

JOSHUA L. , Staff Writer

07/10/2004

CORNFIELD

TRENTON – Trenton Police Director Joseph Santiago was named in a lawsuit for the second time in less than a month yesterday, this time for sexual harassment.

According to a lawsuit filed in Superior Court, Santiago made advances toward a young female officer last August, including asking her to kiss him, telling her she would look good in black leather boots and then harassing the officer's supervisor, a sergeant on the force and also a plaintiff.

Santiago vehemently denied the accusations yesterday and maintained they are part of a larger conspiracy against him in the face of the changes he was bringing to the department.

"This is part of the job when you're a change agent," Santiago said. "You can expect to be sued. ... Obviously, I'm angry. I consider this to be part of an ongoing conspiracy by the people involved with the (Superior Officers' Association)."

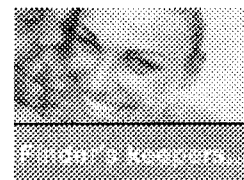
The charges in yesterday's lawsuit were brought by officer Taja Durling and Sgt. Peter Weremijenko.

"You didn't see the mental stress this girl was under just talking to me about this," said attorney John Rittley, who is also the attorney on the harassment lawsuit filed June 28. "This drastically affected her life."

"I don't know why Officer Durling would (say) this," Santiago said. "From the beginning to the end in the accounts she lied. I have no problem saying she lied."

Durling and Weremijenko were unavailable for comment.

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The lawsuit also names Trenton Mayor Doug Palmer, deputy police director Abraham Hemsey and Acting Lt. Paul Messina.

Palmer said last night that, upon Santiago's request, he would launch an investigation into the charges. Santiago said he would be willing to take a polygraph to prove his innocence.

"I support and stand by Director Santiago 100 percent," Palmer said. "This is just another pitiful attempt to try to stop the progress that has been moving forward in the Trenton Police Department. It's not going to work."

Santiago was sued last month by four city cops and a retired captain that alleged that he took vengeance upon officers that didn't comply with his bidding, that he violated state law and slandered those who got in his way.

Lt. Joseph Valdora, a plaintiff in that case and vice president of the Trenton Superior Officers' Association, said that Santiago is out of control.

Valdora said yesterday that Santiago should resign or be fired by Palmer.

"There's absolutely no basis for a conspiracy," he said. "It's an old axiom in law enforcement: If you can't argue the case in facts then you attack the people bringing it up."

"The facts are going to speak for themselves at some point. With Joe Santiago, it's very believable."

The lawsuit details allegations of sexual harassment against Durling that allegedly took place last August, while she was assigned to the Roebing restaurant district on foot patrol.

Among the allegations:

- While on duty in early August, Santiago approached Durling and "offensively grabbed" her arm "in a suggestive fashion." Santiago then allegedly asked the plaintiff if she was wearing her protective vest as he glared down at her chest. Santiago allegedly asked if Durling wanted to move up in rank and allegedly said that even though the officer didn't have enough seniority for the move, he could "make things happen."

- A week later, Santiago allegedly approached Durling "in a provocative manner" and directed her to follow him to Diamonds Restaurant. With the doors locked, Santiago allegedly directed Durling to sit with him and his friends, including Hemsey. Santiago allegedly called her "cute" and reached for her body and said, "Come give your boss a kiss."

Santiago allegedly told Durling that she would be perfect for a mounted horse unit or motorcycle unit. Durling said she couldn't ride either and Santiago allegedly said, "You can still wear the high black leather boots for me, but only if that is all you wear."

- After Durling reported the incidents to Weremijenko, Santiago allegedly disciplined him for "some convoluted reason and ordered (Weremijenko) to walk a foot post." The lawsuit says that Santiago's actions against Weremijenko were because of his relationship with Durling as a witness to the harassment.

Rittley said that Durling came forward with the accusations in the "last six months" and that the claims were investigated. He said there are multiple witnesses to corroborate her side of the story.


"We're in the business to make money," Rittley said. "We represent (officers) in civil rights cases. We don't pick up a bad case because we don't make any money that way."

Said Santiago: "We're moving on. I'm going to stay as long as this takes to get it done. The more (lawsuits) they file, the longer I stay."

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