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Tuesday

Weather

Tonight: Clear. Lows near 40.
Wednesday: Sunny. Highs in the mid-60s.
Details on page 2A.

Parish, Housing Authority settle harassment suit

□ It is the second sexual harassment settlement that local government has agreed to in as many weeks.

By CHARLES LUSSIER

The Courier

Two local government entities are paying a total of \$125,000 to a former public housing administrator to settle her claim that two off-duty Houma Police officers harassed her sex-

ually over a two-year period.

It is the second sexual harassment settlement that local government has agreed to in as many weeks.

The long running lawsuit, filed in late July 1997, was settled tentatively at a pretrial settlement conference in September of this year before U.S. Magistrate Judge Lance Africk. The deal, however, was not finalized until two weeks ago and court papers seeking to have it formally dismissed were filed last week, Doug Sunseri, Alvis' attorney, said.

Cheryl Alvis, her husband Michael, and their four children will receive \$90,000 from Alvis' former employer, the Houma Housing

Authority, and \$35,000 from Terrebonne Parish government. The Housing Authority pays premiums to a New York insurance company and the parish is self-insured, meaning local taxpayer money will pay for the parish's share directly. Each side will pay its own court costs and attorney's fees.

Cheryl Alvis's cousin, Florence, who also uses Sunseri's New Orleans firm, settled 11 days ago a separate, unrelated sexual harassment lawsuit against Parish Councilman J.B. Braux for \$7,500.

Sunseri said that Cheryl Alvis' unshakable testimony through five days of trying depositions more than anything spurred the settle-

ment talks.

"The other side realized that she was a very credible plaintiff and they did not want to take the chance of a judge and jury seeing that," Sunseri said.

Alvis' lawsuit alleged violation of federal civil rights and state laws.

Alvis started working at the Housing Authority in 1985. By the start of 1994, she had worked her way up to manager. By the end of the year, Lt. Freddy Williams and later Capt. John Price began to make unwanted sexual comments and advances, Alvis claimed. The two were working a private security detail in Police Department uniforms

when the lawsuit alleges they engaged in an abusive course of conduct against Alvis that included inappropriate statements and jokes and in at least two instances, unwanted touching and a sexual assault.

In a written statement, Assistant Parish Attorney Dave Norman distanced the parish from the allegations against Williams and Price.

"The two officers were working for the Houma Housing Authority and not for the parish, but because they were wearing the uniform of the Houma Police Department at the time, they were therefore representing

SETTLE, continue on 6A

SETTLE *Continued from 1A*

the integrity of the department," Norman said. "The parish both disciplined the two officers and contributed to the settlement in a secondary role to the Houma Housing Authority's primary position."

Price has since resigned from the Police Department, and Williams was demoted from lieutenant to a police officer first class. Their attorney, Michael Scurto, declined to comment on the settlement.

Attempts to reach Housing Authority attorney Susan Clade Friday and Monday were unsuccessful.

Alvis claimed that her complaints to superiors fell on deaf ears and that the Housing Authority had no viable sexual harassment policy.

Alma Scott, who was the assistant director of the Houma Housing Authority when Alvis worked there, said her agency, a branch of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, had a sexual harassment policy in place before the lawsuit, but has made changes as a result of the litigation.

Alvis is glad to have this behind her, Sunseri said.

"If we went to trial we could have gotten more money, but Cheryl Alvis didn't want to go through the nightmare again," he said.

Like most court settlements, neither side is admitting to any liability or blame. But Sunseri said that's OK; actions speak louder than words.

"I would rather people not apologize and pay money," he said.