

THE CAPITAL

County settles sex abuse lawsuit

\$175,000 to 2 former volunteer firefighters

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Two former volunteer firefighters claimed they were molested in 2004 and 2005 by the then-president of the Odenton Volunteer Fire Company.

And when they spoke to supervisors about Louis D'Camera - who committed suicide in July 2005 shortly after police caught him with a male prostitute - those complaints were rebuffed, they said.

The fire company and county deny D'Camera abused the men and don't believe anyone tried to cover it up. Still, they agreed last week to pay the two men a total of \$175,000 as well as "reasonable attorney's fees" to settle a lawsuit filed last year in U.S. District Court in Baltimore. Lawyers for the county and the victims - who were 16 and 19 when the abuse allegedly began - are still arguing over the final bill for attorney fees, but it is expected to be more than \$100,000.

"This is not an admission of guilt by any defendant. It is a settlement," County Attorney Jonathan Hodgson said of the payout, which was one of the largest in the county's history. He stressed the county settled to avoid the cost of further litigation and the risk of a potentially larger jury award.

Joyce Smithey, an attorney for the alleged victims, saw it differently. She noted a federal judge on Wednesday entered judgments against the county and the company.

"I think we have exposed what was going on at the station," she said. "They need to clean up what is happening there."

The victims don't expect that to happen, though, since they feel the county turned its back on them in 2006 and let the volunteers drive them from the station.

"I don't think anyone will ever really be held accountable," said the older victim, who is now 25. He noted that many of the men he spoke to about the abuse in 2004 and 2005 are still in charge of the Odenton volunteers.

"This is about as close as we are going to get (to accountability)," added the younger victim, who is now 21.

All of the settlement money - \$125,000 to the older victim and \$50,000 to the younger victim - will come out of the county's self-insurance fund. None of the money will come out of the coffers of the Odenton volunteers.

Division Chief Michael Cox, spokesman for the county Fire Department, on Friday declined to comment about the case, forwarding questions to Hodgson. Officials with the Odenton volunteers, which honored D'Camera with a portrait and a scholarship after his death, responded to a series of questions with only a one-sentence statement.

"The Odenton Volunteer Fire Company denies the allegations in the complaint," said Troy Odendhal, the company's current president.

The allegations

The abuse began shortly after the two volunteers joined the department in 2003 and 2004, according to the lawsuit.

The victims claimed D'Camera repeatedly made them strip and sit on his lap, usually while he chided them about their poor performance at the station and at school. The older victim said D'Camera also fondled him and forced him to masturbate at least a dozen times over two years.

The victims told detectives they did not want to be molested, but that they let it happen because they felt intimidated by D'Camera's physical size and political pull in the department. They tried to stop it by talking to their supervisors, but said that didn't work.

The older victim said he first told Capt. Jonathan Kakuk about the abuse in late 2003 or early 2004, and that the captain told him he would take care of it. The victim later spoke with Assistant Chief Donald Evick and Vice President Wylie Donaldson, according to the police report and lawsuit.

Neither Evick nor Donaldson called police until July 19, 2005, four days before D'Camera committed suicide in Harwood. They explained they didn't feel they could come forward until Baltimore City Police caught D'Camera with a male prostitute June 24, 2005, and charged him with perverted practice.

"This was the most powerful man in the firehouse," the younger victim told The Capital.

At the time of his arrest, D'Camera was the president of the Odenton volunteers. He also was serving as the department's quartermaster - a paid position - and was sitting on the board of the Maryland State Fireman's Association.

D'Camera, who joined the station when he was 16, was inducted into the Anne Arundel County Volunteer Firefighters Association's Hall of Fame in 2003.

The arrest, which led the county Fire Department to suspend D'Camera from duty, ultimately did little to damage his reputation at the station. Even after his death, members hung a portrait of him in the station and created a scholarship in his honor.

"Louis D'Camera was a great man," Evick told police shortly after the funeral.

The Odenton bosses were not so complimentary of the older victim.

"Personally, I don't like him," Kakuk said, describing him to police as a misfit who regularly "messed up."

Kakuk, who Cox said is no longer a registered volunteer with the county, denied the victim ever told him about the alleged sex abuse.

"Absolutely not," he said, according to the report. "No way."

Evick told detectives the older victim did tell him about the sexual advances, but stressed the victim asked him to not tell anyone. According to the police report, Evick added he was proud of how he handled the incident; that the company's board of directors actually commended him for offering the victim a "listening ear."

Past problems

This was not the first time D'Camera was accused of molesting a young firefighter.

Unbeknownst to the two victims who filed the lawsuit, a 16-year-old boy from Severn complained to police in 1998 that D'Camera fondled him.

D'Camera was charged, but ultimately acquitted of one count of third-degree sex offense, according to the lawsuit.

"We never knew about this guy," said the older victim, who learned about the case from a private investigator.

A police report reveals several similarities between that incident and those cited in the lawsuit. According to the report, D'Camera chastised that victim, who was 16 at the time, in a bathroom at the fire station and grabbed the boy's genitals. He threatened to "break him in half."

The older victim noted that is the same phrase D'Camera said to him in 2005 as the man touched his genitals and chastised him for doing a bad job around the fire station. The older victim said he didn't see the 1998 police report until 2008, three years after he filed his report.

"How can anyone look at this and not see Louis D'Camera is a bad guy?" the older victim asked.