

Two former volunteer firefighters allege misconduct by ex-president

By Justin Fenton
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Two former volunteer firefighters have filed suit against an Anne Arundel County fire company and the county government, claiming that a former fire company president sexually abused them when they were teenage recruits, and that fire officials ignored their pleas for help.

The former president, Louis A. D'Camera, a 26-year member of the Odenton Volunteer Fire Company, repeatedly forced the teens to perform sex acts, strip naked or sit on his lap, according to the lawsuit filed Friday in county Circuit Court. D'Camera committed suicide in 2005 after Baltimore City police said they saw him perform a sex act on an 18-year-old man in a truck and charged him with perverted practice.

According to the complaint, the firefighters disclosed the abuse to their supervisors, who told them to keep quiet. One of the two claims he lost a job opportunity when company members allegedly made defamatory statements during a background check.

Robert L. Rose, current president of the Odenton fire company, and County Attorney Jonathan Hodgson said yesterday that they had not seen the lawsuit and could not comment. An attorney for the plaintiffs also declined to comment as the plaintiffs pursue a legal motion to proceed with the case anonymously.

"They've already suffered a lot of irreparable harm," said attorney Joyce E. Smithey, "and I want to make sure their anonymity is respected."

The allegations are the second black eye for the county's volunteer fire system in the past year. Last week, Kelly T. McColl, a former treasurer of the Riviera Beach Volunteer Fire Company, was ordered to serve a month in jail and repay half of the \$50,000 in department funds that he spent on his mortgage, credit-card bills and car payments.

In the wake of the Riviera Beach investigation last year - which also included allegations of sexual misconduct, pornography on station computers and firefighters answering calls after drinking - County Council members and fire officials said such problems were isolated, and that they saw no need to increase oversight of the volunteer companies.

Through a spokesman, Fire Chief David L. Stokes Sr. said that he had "full confidence in the volunteer companies and supports the volunteer system. However, we don't know what's going on involving Odenton and it would be inappropriate for us to comment on the system without knowing exactly what's going on."

D'Camera joined the Odenton company at age 16 and devoted his life to firefighting. He worked for the county Fire Department overseeing equipment and supplies and served on the boards of

the county and state volunteer firefighters association. He was inducted into the Anne Arundel County Volunteer Firefighters Hall of Fame in 2003.

That year, one of the two plaintiffs, who are identified in the suit as John Doe No.1 and John Doe No. 2, joined the fire company at age 19. D'Camera lured him to his Piney Orchard apartment as a "rite of passage" and ordered the man to undress and masturbate in front of him, the suit claims.

The man was assaulted 15 more times, typically in a private engineman's room, the suit says. In late 2003 or 2004, the man says in the suit, he told a captain about the assaults. He claims that the captain told him not to tell anyone else, and that he would handle the situation. After the man filed a police report after the last incident in June 2005, the suit alleges, Rose and Chief Charles Rogers told him to "get over" what happened. He says in the lawsuit that another captain told him in January 2006, "It's time for you to leave OVFC."

"Although largely unjustified, you have accumulated a lot of adversaries at Odenton. Your safety and reputation are potentially at risk," the officer told him, according to the suit.

The man said he resigned at the end of the month.

The second plaintiff joined the company in September 2004 at age 16 as a cadet and alleges in the suit that the first assault occurred that fall, when D'Camera called him into the engineman's room to discuss his report card. The suit says he asked the boy why he didn't talk much, and he said he was shy.

According to the lawsuit, D'Camera told the boy to think of the most embarrassing thing he could think of to overcome his shyness - D'Camera suggested undressing - and then instructed him to walk around the room nude while D'Camera scolded him about his grades.

The boy resigned from the company in July 2005 and returned in February 2006 after D'Camera's death. But he left again in March last year, after members of the company retaliated against him for filing a police report against D'Camera, the lawsuit says.

He was given undesirable riding assignments, and assigned to ride on the "tower" truck despite a fear of heights, the suits says. He also alleges that he was given a disproportionate number of chores around the station house.

The plaintiffs filed police reports July 17 and July 18, 2005, respectively. D'Camera shot himself in the head July 24 while parked in his car at a park-and-ride lot in Harwood.

The lawsuit claims that D'Camera left "many" suicide notes in which he admitted that he assaulted the younger plaintiff. The police investigation was eventually closed because there was no one to charge.

In 1998, D'Camera was charged with third-degree sexual assault for allegedly fondling a 17-year-old volunteer at the Odenton company. According to the lawsuit, his behavior was well-

known in the company and included ordering young volunteers to run around the firehouse naked.

The plaintiffs are seeking unspecified compensatory and punitive damages, alleging negligent retention and supervision, and intentional infliction of emotional distress. The older plaintiff also is alleging defamation.

The county has 1,400 firefighters, including more than 800 career personnel and more than 500 volunteers at 30 fire stations. The county runs 11 of the stations and volunteers run 19, although the county owns some equipment and buildings run by the volunteers.

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