

The Sun

Fired housing manager alleges reverse discrimination; Black supervisor used complaints as excuse, woman's attorney claims

by Del Quentin Wilber SUN STAFF

September 22, 1999 Page(s): 3B
Edition: HOWARD
Section: LOCAL
Length: 499 words
Record Number: 9909220046

A lawyer for the former manager of the Hilltop Apartments in Ellicott City, the oldest county-owned public housing complex, alleges that his client was discriminated against and fired because she is white.

During a hearing yesterday in Howard County Circuit Court, James C. Strouse said officials used four complaints against his client, F. Gail Huddleston, as an excuse to fire her. Strouse said in court that Leonard Vaughan, the county's housing administrator, who is black, fired Huddleston because "he wanted to replace her with someone much younger and of a different race."

"Mr. Vaughan is discriminating against Mrs. Huddleston in terms of sex and race," Strouse said. "He was out to get her."

Vaughan could not be reached for comment, but Richard E. Basehoar, a senior assistant county solicitor, denied the allegations of racism in the housing office.

"I would say [the allegations] are completely baseless," Basehoar. "Quite frankly, I don't think anyone knows what she's talking about. We're disturbed."

He declined to discuss why Huddleston was fired last month, saying he was prevented from doing so because it was a personnel matter.

In an affidavit, Raquel Sanudo, the county's chief administrative officer, wrote that Huddleston was fired because "she was continuing to exhibit a pattern of abusive, disrespectful and intolerant behavior in dealing with tenants, the public and co-employees."

"I advised [Huddleston] the county had received complaints concerning her behavior from applicants for housing assistance, persons assisting individuals in seeking housing assistance, former employees, and tenants," Sanudo wrote.

This month, Huddleston filed a lawsuit seeking to temporarily prevent the county from firing until her appeal through county government was finished. But Judge Diane O. Leasure denied her request yesterday, saying she must exhaust the county process before filing suit in Circuit Court.

Huddleston managed the complex for 13 years, Strouse said, and worked in the county's housing office for 16 years.

Strouse said Huddleston was fired based on four complaints during the past four years by residents and a former employee. He said Huddleston received a sub-par evaluation last month based on those complaints, though she was never told about them before receiving the evaluation. County officials also complained that she "wasn't as respectful to her direct supervisor as she should have been" in e-mail she sent to him, Strouse said.

"If the guy is that sensitive, he sure shouldn't be her supervisor," her attorney said.

Huddleston is appealing the August evaluation and is also appealing her firing with the county's personnel board, Strouse said.

Copyright 1999 The Baltimore Sun Company