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Patchogue Fire District Faces Racial Bias Suit

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A 47-year-old African-American man has sued the Patchogue Fire District and related agencies and their members, charging a wrongful and racially based termination as a volunteer firefighter.

William L. Antonio filed the suit on Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Central Islip and seeks \$96 million in compensatory and punitive damages, said his lawyer, Frederick K. Brewington of Hempstead.

Jeff Siler, a Garden City lawyer representing the Patchogue Fire District, said he was unaware of the suit and declined to comment.

The suit says that Patchogue village officials settled a discrimination claim by Antonio last year for an undisclosed amount. The village is not a defendant in this suit.

Mayor Edward Ihne would not confirm any settlement and said Antonio resigned his village job as an emergency dispatcher in December. "I don't know anything about discrimination," he added. He referred further questions to Bruce Calderon, a Mineola lawyer for the village, but Calderon could not be reached.

In his suit, Antonio, of Patchogue, said he had filed a discrimination complaint against the village with the State Division of Human Rights but that as a stipulation of a November settlement with the village, he withdrew the charge. He had been an emergency dispatcher for the village part time since 1977 and full time since 1993. In the suit, he said he was suspended without pay on trumped-up misconduct charges instigated by local fire officials.

Antonio, who had been a volunteer firefighter for 24 years before his termination in 2001, charged that he had been the subject of derogatory racial epithets and threats. The suit said it intensified in recent years after he made written complaints to top fire officials and county, state and federal human rights agencies.

The discriminatory treatment cited in the suit included being called racial epithets by white employees and members of the Patchogue Fire District and ambulance company and by white employees and members of "co-conspirator Village of Patchogue."

The suit said Antonio was the fire department's only black firefighter, except for two others who never passed the probationary period, during his at least 24 years there.

"I hope this suit will send a strong message that racism and discrimination must be challenged," Brewington said.