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\$150G for correction officer in bias case

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For Patricia C. Luca, a seven-year legal battle against Nassau County agencies has brought some vindication: Last week a jury awarded the county correction officer \$150,000 for being discriminated against in retaliation for her earlier sexual harassment lawsuit against the county.

Luca, 38, a 12-year correction veteran, had charged the county, its police department and its civil service commission with blocking her from becoming a police officer in retaliation for the earlier lawsuit. The eight-member federal jury, with its compensatory damage award, apparently believed her.

"She has a stellar work history as a corrections officer and should have been a welcome member to the police department," said her Hempstead lawyer, Fred Brewington. "She was the victim of retaliation because she exercised her right to not be discriminated against."

Court papers showed the jury verdict but not the award amount. Brewington gave the figure. But Chief Deputy County Attorney Ruth Markovitz said, "The county believes the verdict is not warranted, and we are exploring measures we can take to contest it."

In the most recent lawsuit, Luca argued that because of her previous lawsuit she was harassed by the police officers investigating her background. She also said that because the county Civil Service Commission designated her as "non-select," she not only was rejected by the county police but also by several village departments, including Sands Point, Port Washington, Hempstead, Old Brookville, Lake Success, Rockville Centre and Kensington.

"The police never actually processed my application. Instead they just harassed me," Luca said Friday in an interview.

Luca's first lawsuit, filed in 2000, stemmed from an in-house diversity training session

with 50 colleagues, in which a fictitious "scenario" was distributed that used her name, embarrassed and humiliated her, and made her the target of lewd comments from many of her colleagues. She said the incident caused her mental anguish and emotional distress and destroyed her self-esteem, personal dignity and career. She accepted a settlement offer from the county in July 2003.

Then, according to court papers, Luca, who had placed 20th on the police civil service exam given in 1994, was told on Dec. 3, 2003, that she was a "non-select" candidate on the certified Civil Service List and did not place in the incoming Nassau County Police Academy that began Jan. 16, 2004. She then began her discrimination lawsuit.

Court papers showed U.S. District Court Judge Frederick Block asked both sides to reach an agreement by this Wednesday, if possible, on how much Luca should get in "back and front pay."