

Finding supports officer in Nassau jail bias case

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The state Division of Human Rights has issued a probable cause finding supporting a Nassau County correction officer's claim that she suffered racial and gender discrimination in the East Meadow facility after she reported finding a swastika and the letters "KKK" written on a door frame in the jail last September.

"Probable cause exists to believe that the respondents have engaged in or are engaging in the unlawful discriminatory practice complained of," read the division's May 28 determination after investigating 15-year veteran Mary Williams' claims against the Nassau County Sheriff's Department and Nassau County.

The state agency has recommended the case for a public hearing, where witnesses must testify under oath. It also determined that jail and county officials failed to follow their own rules and procedures for handling discrimination complaints.

Williams' attorney, Fred Brewington of Hempstead, said his client, who is black, is pleased by the agency's finding but troubled that county and jail officials "did not cooperate

with the investigation."

"There has been a very concerning culture and environment in the jail when it comes to issues of race and discrimination and this is unfortunately another example of that," Brewington said. The probable cause finding affords Williams the option of removing the case from the agency and filing a lawsuit in federal court, he said.

County and jail officials could not be reached for comment.

The probable cause finding comes months after a federal jury awarded another black correction officer, Jonathan Wharton, a judgment of \$420,000 on Sept. 17 in his discrimination suit against the jail and county.

Williams filed a complaint with the Division of Human Rights after she reported a disturbing incident to her superiors at the jail but felt ignored by the institution, according to the determination prepared by Leon C. Dimaya, acting director of the Division of Human Rights.

On Sept. 16, Williams found the letters "KKK" and a swastika scribbled on either side of a door frame at the jail medical unit where she worked.

Williams told officials that

she was particularly upset because the images were posted in an area of the jail to which inmates did not have access — suggesting colleagues could be to blame.

She alerted a supervisor and prepared a report for a sergeant at the facility, Sheriff Michael Sposato, Internal Affairs and union officials, according to the determination. Jail officials photographed the images.

But Williams claimed that a week later she had not been interviewed by jail officials who were supposed to investigate, prompting her to contact the jail's Equal Employment Opportunity officer. On Oct. 6, the jail's EEO officer and the county's EEO officer told Williams that nothing could be done for her because there were no witnesses or video recordings of the deed, the agency said.

The officials told Williams the incident would not be investigated further, the determination said.

Dimaya, outlining the county's response to Williams' reports, said Sposato issued an order reminding jail personnel to abide by anti-discrimination laws and rules.

Williams filed her complaint with the state Division of Human Rights on Nov. 17.