



Firefighter wins \$11.2M in bias case

By [Jordyn Reiland](#)

Law Bulletin staff writer



Dana L. Kurtz (at microphones) of Kurtz Law Offices Ltd. in Hinsdale stands with her client, Dena Lewis (on Kurtz's left), Heidi Karr Sleper, also of Kurtz Law Offices Ltd. (far right), and computer forensics expert Andrew Garrett, during a news conference Tuesday. A Cook County jury awarded Lewis \$11.2 million in a case where she alleged sexual harassment and gender discrimination against her co-workers and supervisors. — *Jordyn Reiland*

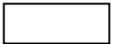
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A Cook County jury Monday awarded more than \$11.2 million to a female firefighter who contended her co-workers and supervisors sexually harassed and discriminated against her for the entirety of her time on the job.

The verdict against the city of Country Club Hills was reached after about two hours of deliberation following a more than two-week trial before Associate Judge Brigid Mary McGrath.

Dena Lewis became a Country Club Hills firefighter in May 1998, wanting to continue the legacy her father, grandfather and uncles carried.

"The city of County Club Hills destroyed that dream," Lewis said during a news conference in the Daley Center lobby Tuesday.



discrimination, sexual harassment and retaliation claims under the Illinois Human Rights Act.

The individual defendants were dismissed prior to trial, according to court records.

Lewis contended at trial throughout her time with the department she experienced instances which included lewd comments made by a former fire chief; a male employee broke into the bathroom while she was taking a shower; another male firefighter took her house keys, made a copy of them and broke into her home; and several male firefighters would attempt to lean in to kiss her, hug her or make sexual overtures to her.

When she reported the alleged misconduct to her supervisor, she received a written reprimand.

Lewis also alleged several of the male firefighters were watching pornography on the firehouse computers, she reported the incidents but her superiors did nothing. Instead, she said, she was retaliated against.

In September 2011, Lewis was scheduled to take an exam to become a fire lieutenant when she found out Pyca, the deputy fire chief, was assigned to write a quarter of the questions even though his son, Carl, was also taking the exam, according to the complaint.

When she told Ellington that she believed the fact that the elder Pyca was writing the questions for an exam his son would be taking the act was improper and illegal, Ellington allegedly told her to "lose your schoolgirl attitude" and "let the best man win."

Carl Pycz and Lewis took the exam and, when the promotion list was posted, it showed he scored the highest among everyone who took the test.

Pycz was promoted in November 2011 and allegedly continued to harass Lewis, including excluding her from eating with other members of the department, assigning her to menial tasks and unfairly disciplining her, according to the complaint.

Lewis' attorney, Dana L. Kurtz, of Kurtz Law Offices Ltd. in Hinsdale, said during the news conference a June 2010 memo was discovered shortly before trial which showed Lewis was to be promoted to be lieutenant after two others retired.

Kurtz said her computer forensic expert Andrew Garrett testified at trial that someone had tried to erase the electronic documents on more than one occasion.

Garrett also testified that he determined firefighters had conducted thousands of web searches for pornography but the imagery itself was gone.

Lewis has been on paid leave from the department since August 2015 and has spent most of her time caring for her father and volunteering. She said during the news conference she has not yet determined what her future employment plans will be.

The department currently employs one full-time woman, an assistant chief, and three others who are part-time, according to Lewis.



The judge is also expected to rule on injunctive relief at that time.

The defendants were represented by Stephen R. Miller, Nikoleta Lamprinakos, Melinda J. Wetzel and Amanda Tiebert Collman of Robbins Schwartz in addition to John B. Murphey of Rosenthal Murphey Coblentz & Donahue.

Miller could not immediately be reached for comment.

The case is *Dena Lewis v. City of County Club Hills, et al.*, 12 L 9916.

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