

Class Action Lawsuit Launched Against Waterloo Regional Police Service and Waterloo Regional Police Association

WATERLOO: A class action lawsuit has been issued against the Waterloo Regional Police Service (WRPS) and the Waterloo Regional Police Association (WRPA) for systemic and institutional gender-based discrimination and harassment, sexual harassment and sexual assault. Representative plaintiffs Constable Angelina Rivers and Constable Sharon Zehr allege that they were subjected to routine harassment and abuse at the hands of their male colleagues and superiors. Any effort to address these issues internally were dismissed and resulted in additional ridicule, degradation and retaliation to the plaintiffs, pointing to a culture of misogyny that was tolerated and even promoted at the highest levels of the organization.

The plaintiffs are seeking general and aggravated damages for class members in the amount of one hundred million dollars and punitive and exemplary damages of fifty million dollars. The associated Family Class are seeking general damages of ten million dollars, special damages of five million dollars and punitive damages of two million dollars.

Angelina Rivers began working as a constable with the WRPS in 2006. Male officers refused to provide her with backup when she was dispatched to dangerous situations. When she reported her safety concerns to WRPS superiors she was warned to be careful how she treated people or she would get her "ass kicked". She received sexually inappropriate text messages and pictures from her direct superior, who remains in a position of authority over women at WRPS to this day.

"When I tried to address the issues I was facing internally I was dismissed and ridiculed at every turn", said Angelina. "I am participating in this lawsuit so that my daughters, or any woman who wants to pursue a career in law enforcement, can do so without facing the kind of systemic harassment, discrimination and abuse that I faced."

Sharon Zehr served with WRPS for two and a half years. On her first day of work she was told by two male officers that they did not want her or any women on the force and that it was up to them "to get the women out." Her Sergeant wrote a negative and fictitious report on her performance and in presenting this report told her to "quit or get fired". On one occasion five male officers attempted to drag Sharon against her will into the men's change room. Sharon was forced to quit and move out of the Waterloo region due to concerns for her safety.

"My dream of becoming a respected police officer was systematically and intentionally turned into my worst nightmare", said Sharon. "The injustices I faced at the hands of men whose job it was to uphold public justice have shaken my belief in the police system to its core."

Superintendent Barry Zehr is representing the Family Class in this suit. As a member of the HR department he raised many of the concerns addressed in this action but his demands for change were ignored.

"The actions of these men also impacted the families, friends and communities of the officers", said Barry. "Our family continues to deal with the trauma they inflicted to this day."

"I got into class action law because it has the potential to force real change and make things better for those facing institutional injustice," said lawyer Doug Elliott. "No male officer on this force would tolerate his daughter or his wife being treated so disgracefully. Open season on female law enforcement personnel needs to end now."