

Fayette County jail officers sued for work discrimination

BY CHRISTOPHER LEACH
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A former Fayette County jail officer is suing several of her former colleagues and supervisors, claiming racial discrimination and a hostile work environment.

The lawsuit was filed June 27 by Charnelle Richards and her lawyer, Shaun Wimberly. The lawsuit lists her former supervisors, Joseph Price, Lisa Farmer, Jessica Bishop, Hunter Hershey and Bradley Baker as defendants, along with coworkers Justin Piercey and Jonathon Hunt.

The Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government, which maintains the jail, is also a defendant in the lawsuit. Susan Straub, a spokesperson for the city, said the city government can't comment on pending lawsuits.

Richards, a Black woman, started working in the custody portion of the jail in December 2016, but

moved to intake processing, a specialized area, seven months later. The lawsuit says she was given only three weeks to learn the procedures of the new department, which is half the amount of time it's supposed to take to be properly trained.

Other white employees were given more opportunities and time to learn the procedures than Richards, the lawsuit says. Richards was threatened with a demotion if she did not complete the training within three weeks.

Richards was also written up and threatened with a demotion for making work mistakes while her white coworkers did not receive similar treatment for their mistakes, according to the lawsuit.

Another example of Richards' unfair treatment is how her supervisors handled the jail's overtime policy, according to the lawsuit.

Jail policy allows officers to choose assign-

ments during mandatory overtime periods, but Richards claimed that when she chose her assignment, supervisors gave the assignment to white employees instead, increasing Richard's workload while reducing her coworkers'.

Richards said she was written up for insubordination when she complained about the process.

Richards reported the unfair treatment to jail management, but the jail took no action. The lawsuit says her supervisors' conduct continued, and the write-ups became more severe.

Richards also claimed Hunt and Piercey greeted each other with a three-finger salute that's sometimes used as a symbol of white supremacy, according to the lawsuit. Jail staff let a three-fingered symbol be displayed on the jail's Christmas tree and copy machine despite complaints from Richards.

Another time, Hunt and

Piercey pranked Richards into thinking she was being detained by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer, according to the lawsuit. Richards made a complaint about the prank to Capt. Patrick Burns, but her concerns were not accepted, and more write-ups were levied against her.

The lawsuit says Richards suffered a loss of wages, humiliation, embarrassment and will suffer a loss of income in the future. She is seeking back pay she would have earned if she had not been discriminated against, compensatory damages for the humiliation, a declaratory judgment that the defendants' actions were unlawful and an injunction against further discriminatory practices.

Maj. Matt LeMonds, with the Fayette County jail, confirmed Price, Farmer and Hershey no longer work in the Division of Community Cor-

rections, while Bishop, Baker, Piercey and Hunt remain employed.

LeMonds said the division can't comment on pending litigation.

ONE JAIL GUARD RECENTLY PLEADED TO SEX CRIME

One of the defendants in Richards' lawsuit, Joseph Price, recently accepted a guilty plea deal in a separate sex crime case.

In May 2023, Price was indicted by a Franklin County grand jury on four counts of first-degree unlawful transaction with a minor and one count of first-degree attempted unlawful sexual transaction with a minor, according to court records. The case was not related to Price's employment with the jail.

This year, Price accepted a guilty plea deal for amended charges of two counts of first-degree wanton endangerment, two counts of sexual misconduct and two counts of stalking. The plea deal said Price exposed the two victims to a risk of serious physical injury, hugged the victims from behind for sexual gratification and engaged in conduct that placed the victims in fear.

On June 27, Price was sentenced to five years in prison. But court documents say the first six months of his sentence will be served in home incarceration, and if he doesn't violate the terms of his sentence in those six months, he will skip prison and be on probation for four years and nine months.

Maj. Matt LeMonds, with the Fayette County jail, previously confirmed Price was a lieutenant at the jail and had been employed by the Division of Community Corrections since 2012. He was suspended pending the outcome of the investigation but has since resigned.

While working as Richards' supervisor at the jail, Price once got into Richards' face and screamed at her in a demeaning manner in front of inmates and other employees during a mandatory overtime shift, according to Richards' lawsuit. Richards filed a complaint about the incident, but the discriminatory treatment didn't change.

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State audit of Fayette schools set for completion at end of 2026

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A special examination of Fayette County Public Schools by the state is expected to be completed at the end of 2026, the state auditor's office said this week.

Kentucky State Auditor Allison Ball has completed a special examination of the Kentucky Department of Education, and is currently conducting an examination of Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville. The audit of Fayette County Schools is being conducted after concerns were raised over the district's \$16 million budget shortfall and the recent move to increase local

taxes, the auditor's office previously said.

The examination of the state's education department was required under House Bill 825, passed by the 2024 General Assembly. The last budget bill, House Bill 6 in 2024, provided an appropriation to complete the Jefferson County audit.

"We are currently conducting the JCPS audit, which will conclude in the summer of 2026. We plan to have the FCPS audit completed by the end of 2026," said Joy Markland, spokesperson for the state auditor's office.

Ball said her office worked with PCG Consulting Group, which she described as one of the nation's preeminent edu-

cation auditing entities, to examine the state education department's activities from July 1, 2020, through June 30, 2024.

Markland said the auditor's office has not determined if it will engage an outside entity for the Fayette County Public Schools' special examination.

"Several factors play into that decision, including what we find as we begin the audit," she said.

"At this time, we have no comment on this matter," Fayette district spokesperson Miranda Scully said Thursday.

In Fayette County, the school board attempted to increase the occupational license tax rate for schools earlier this year to address the budget shortfall, a move which Republican Attorney General Russell Coleman said was unlawful.

According to Coleman's opinion, proper

notice was not given and a public hearing was not held when school board chair Tyler Murphy, vice-chair Amy Green and board member Penny Christian asked the fiscal court to increase the tax rate from 0.5% to 0.75%.

Murphy later suggested to the superintendent and board that they "pause" raising the occupational license tax for schools. The Fayette County school board agreed and canceled a June 23 public hearing and vote on increasing the tax.

The district has since convened a budget work

group with three meetings, including meetings at 5:30 p.m. on July 15 and July 29, at The Hub for Innovative Learning and Leadership (The Hill) at 100 Midland Avenue.

Superintendent Demetris Liggins has since said that he wished the district had handled the timing of the tax increase proposal differently, taking additional steps to communicate earlier and more directly.

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