

Tollway EEO officer claims punishment after complaints

An Equal Employment Opportunity officer with the Illinois Tollway has sued the agency, claiming she was suspended in retaliation for two reports she wrote alleging contracting improprieties by its former chief procurement officer.

Mary Wright of Naperville says she first complained about potential conflicts of interest in 2009. She questioned a close relationship between the procurement officer and an employee of HNTB Corp.

HNTB, a nationwide engineering and construction management firm based in St. Louis, has received more than \$100 million in contracts from the Tollway since 2004.

Wright also accused the procurement officer of verbally abusing a female employee.

The procurement officer was ordered to undergo sensitivity training, but Wright's retaliation complaint suggests the training didn't stick. She complained that, by earlier this year, the procurement officer had created a hostile work environment.

After she complained, Wright says her duties were downgraded to busy work. At one point, she was directed to "maintain records on chair movements," keeping tabs on the location of three ergonomic office chairs. Eventually, Wright was even relieved of chair-tracking duty and suspended.

Her lawsuit seeks reinstatement and back pay. A Tollway representative said the agency "takes these allegations very seriously and is conducting an internal investigation into this matter."

Advice: Consider the PR hit you could suffer if you fail to handle discipline the right way. The Illinois Tollway has not publicly stated its reason for suspending Wright, which means the public is getting a one-sided view of the story—Wright's side.

Final note: Suspension—as opposed to termination—is almost always a disciplinary move. Employers should be prepared to offer employees who are being disciplined a legitimate reason for the action.

Given the facts available, this case will turn on whether Wright's actions were within the scope of her employment.