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Women Say Ga. City Ignored Harassment By Police Chief

By **Michael Angell**

Law360 (February 2, 2021, 8:18 PM EST) -- Three female former employees for the city of Jesup, Georgia, allege in a new federal lawsuit that the city's police chief repeatedly groped them and asked to have sex in a cabin owned by the city manager, who they say turned a blind eye to the harassment.

Their complaint filed Monday claims that police chief William Lane made constant sexual advances, touched them without their consent and made their workplace so intolerable that they had to quit. They further allege that City Manager Mike Deal won't enforce the city's discipline policy against Lane.

"Jesup Police Department's chief of police, defendant William Michael 'Mike' Lane, has a pattern of preying on young female employees," the complaint says. "To date, defendant Jesup and defendant Deal have failed to take any action to address defendant Lane's despicable conduct."

Patricia Brantley claims in the suit that about a year after she joined the Jesup police department as an officer, Lane told her in February 2019 that he "had a crush on her for a long time and has always wanted to have sex with her."

When she turned down his request, Lane asked if they could just have oral sex instead, the suit alleges.

Brantley alleges that Lane kept making sexual advances and would grope her while at work. In one episode, Brantley claims that while driving Lane in a squad car, he told her that they could go to Deal's cabin to have sex.

Lane is alleged to have started retaliating against Brantley once he learned in July that she had a boyfriend. Because of his treatment, she says, she resigned from the force in November.

Brantley claims to have reported Lane's behavior to four other Jesup officers. However, she didn't file a formal complaint until after she resigned.

The lawsuit says that city policy requires putting Lane on administrative leave during the investigation. When Brantley asked the city manager why he didn't put Lane on leave, Deal responded, "that's my decision" and that he would only do so if someone was arrested, the suit says.

Grace Kinard alleges that when she joined the force in July 2017, Lane "made hugging and kissing a requirement" of her job. When she tried to deflect the contact, Lane asked if Kinard had a problem with his department, she alleges.

When Kinard got divorced in February 2019, Lane ramped up the harassment with frequent requests for sex and unwanted touching, saying that she owed him for getting her a job, she claims.

Kinard claims that Lane also told her that they could use Deal's cabin for sex because, "Mike is okay with it." Kinard left the department in July 2019, the lawsuit adds.

Grace Straney, who became a secretary for Lane in January 2018, claims that Lane would approach her almost daily for hugs, and would also touch her without her consent after learning her husband was deployed in the military.

The lawsuit says that Lane touched her sexually in early 2019 when she was summoned to his office. When she turned down his request for intercourse, he again asked if they could just have oral sex, the suit says.

Lane asked Straney more than 25 times if they could go to a cabin that "no one knows about" for sex, the lawsuit says, adding that she believed he was referring to Deal's cabin.

Straney told other members of the police department in summer of 2019 that she was pregnant, the lawsuit says. That prompted Lane to send a department-wide email about Straney having to figure out who was the "baby daddy," the lawsuit says.

"This was humiliating for Ms. Straney," the lawsuit adds. She, too, resigned from her position in September 2020 after Lane began to retaliate and harass her at work, according to the suit.

In a statement provided to Law360, Rachel Berlin Benjamin, who is representing the former employees, said, "Women should not be subjected to such egregious sexual harassment and outright sexual assault in the workplace. We intend to hold the City and the individual Defendants accountable."

Lane and Deal did not respond to phone and email requests for comment.

The women are represented by Edward D. Buckley and Rachel Berlin Benjamin of Buckley Beal LLP, Andrew Lampros and Gordon Van Remmen of Hall & Lampros LLP, and Joseph R. Padgett of Roden Law.

Attorney information for Jesup, Lane and Deal was not immediately available.

The case is Brantley et al., v. City of Jesup et al., case number 2:21-cv-00012, in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Georgia.

--Editing by Abbie Sarfo.