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Lowe's pays \$1.7M to settle discrimination case

Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse Inc. has agreed to pay \$1.7 million to settle in a sexual harassment case brought by three employees in Longview, including one who said she was sexually assaulted in 2006.

By **TIM KLASS**
Associated Press Writer

SEATTLE —

Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse Inc. has agreed to pay \$1.7 million to settle in a sexual harassment case brought by three employees in Longview, including one who said she was sexually assaulted in 2006.

Under the three-year consent decree signed Thursday by U.S. District Judge John C. Coughenour, Lowe's also must revise policies on discrimination, harassment and retaliation; provide training on those concerns to all employees at the company's 37 stores in Washington state and 13 stores in Oregon; and report regularly to the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, which filed the lawsuit.

"Severe sex-based harassment of young workers was permitted to run rampant at one of the nation's largest retailers," Acting EEOC Chairman Stuart J. Ishimaru said in a prepared statement. "It is shocking that Lowe's store managers actively engaged in and even encouraged such blatant unlawful conduct and then retaliated against the victims for objecting to it."

Lowe's denied the claims of the three workers and did not admit any liability but settled "in the interest of avoiding additional disruption and litigation costs," according to a statement issued by corporate parent Lowe's Cos. Inc. in Mooresville, N.C.

"Lowe's is proud of our anti-discrimination policies and procedures and is pleased the company has been able to secure a settlement with the EEOC that supplements our ongoing efforts to prevent discrimination in the workplace," the statement said, adding that the decree requires only "minor revisions" in sexual harassment policies.

Lowe's is the nation's second-largest home improvement retailer, trailing only The Home Depot Inc., with more than 1,675 stores in the U.S. and Canada.

According to the three workers, their problems began within months after they started work when the store opened in November 2005.

One, a 21-year-old woman, said she repeatedly was implicitly propositioned by the 44-year-old store manager and that he sexually assaulted her in his office after she was given a promotion.

Jeremiah Harrison and Chester Davison, both in their 20s at the time, said department heads called them gay although they are heterosexual and subjected them to graphic sexual references. Davison said that when he complained to the store manager, he was told that he and Harrison should avoid spending time together.

All three said they were subjected to months of verbal abuse and a sexually hostile work environment before Harrison and the woman were fired and Davison resigned under pressure, all by September 2006.

"It became almost like a bad fraternity, and those people had a lot of power," their lawyer, Scott C.G. Blankenship, told The Daily News of Longview after the EEOC lawsuit was filed in February 2008.

The store manager is no longer with Lowe's, said Christine B. Ahearn, vice president for public relations.

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