

For Years City Paid Woman Less Than Men She Supervised: Lawsuit

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A woman who worked for the City of San Diego for 26 years is suing, claiming for years she was paid less than men she directly supervised. She has since been fired.

Lorie Cosio-Azar worked for the city's Sustainability and Environment Protection Department for nearly three decades. She developed a smart program for the city -- a street lighting program that she says saves the city energy and money. "It was noteworthy. It won many awards," she said. "I had a really good reputation at the city for years."

Now, she's suing the city for failure to provide equal pay, gender discrimination and retaliation. "At first, it's unbelievable, and then you're like this is happening to me. I see it on the news with other people. When it started to sink in, it's truly devastating, and you try to rally and use all your resources to get through this, but frankly, it creeps up and you're like, I'm one of those."

According to the suit, as a program manager Azar was paid less than two men, both engineers, whom she directly supervised. In 2014, one of them was paid close to \$107,000. A year later, the other man was promoted and also paid \$107,000. According the lawsuit, Azar's salary remained at \$100,000.

When she brought it up to management over the years, she says the city retaliated against her. She claims staff was taken from under her, she was left out of meetings, and she even had the Smart City Lighting and Metering Program taken from her, too. She says her duties also changed so much that her job became "unbearable."

"It was devastating. Humiliating, too, because [the program] was successful. I had worked on it. Public service was my passion and then ... taken away."

Azar's lawsuit comes on the heels of a city audit that said the city had work to do when it came to closing the pay gap among genders. It says female city employees are paid 83 cents on the dollar compared to men -- similar to what is happening across the country, but worse than what is happening in the State and County of San Diego.

"I said I'm tired of being a victim and I'm going to stand up for myself and for other women in the city paid unequally so that they can have a voice," Azar said.

Her attorney, Josh Gruenberg, said, "We're suing for a lot. I don't know exactly how much yet, Lorie's loss of earnings has yet to be determined. She's going to go out and get another job, and she's going to do her best to get the best job she can, but depending on how that plays out, I believe it's a case that's worth well into the millions."

Gruenberg called her termination “outrageous,” and said, “the fact the city is so guilty of gender pay inequity is outrageous.”

He said, “The message is the city has to immediately address the issue of gender pay disparity, now. Look at the numbers, look at the audit, and fix it. My client and other women are tired of waiting.”

Gruenberg called his client "the face of pay inequity."

Azar said, “You try to maintain and do your work. You try to go on and say well, I’ll get by, but frankly it starts to add up. I had health related issues, emotional upset, problems sleeping, anxiety, depression. Even the strongest people can’t survive that.”

In a statement sent to NBC 7, the city said it takes allegations of gender discrimination seriously and said it will carefully review the complaint.

<https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/california/For-Years-City-Paid-Woman-Less-Than-Men-She-Supervised-Lawsuit-510055371.html>