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Ex-Employees Allege Sexual Harassment at Women's Networking Group

By *SUSAN ANTILLA*

Four former employees of the National Association of Professional Women, a women's networking group, have sued the organization and three of its executives, claiming that a manager had sexually harassed them and that their paychecks had been docked in violation of New York State labor law.

In a complaint filed in Federal District Court in Central Islip, N.Y., on Sept. 25, the four — Lisa DeLisi, Crystal Alexander, Monique McCabe and Anika Cosbert — said that their former manager, Krissy L. DeMonte, had regularly pinched and grabbed their buttocks and called them vulgar names. After they complained, they said, they were fired or forced to resign because of intolerable working conditions.

In a separate lawsuit filed in New York State court in Nassau County in January, Rose Costantino, another former association employee, said that Ms. DeMonte had approached her from behind on many occasions as she sat at her desk and grabbed, squeezed or rubbed her neck and then dropped her hands “to touch, rub and/or feel the top” of her breasts.

In a written statement on Tuesday, the association called the allegations “completely unfounded,” adding that four of the five plaintiffs had been terminated for documented deficiencies in performance and violations of policies and procedures. One plaintiff herself, the association said, had exhibited “a pattern of inappropriate and unprofessional conduct.”

The association went on to say that an independent investigation unearthed no evidence to corroborate “the ridiculous allegations” against Ms. DeMonte.”

Same-sex harassment cases are rare, “but are on the rise,” said Gary Phelan, an employment lawyer at the Connecticut law firm Cohen & Wolf. Sex harassment does not have to be motivated by sexual desire to violate the law, Mr. Phelan said. “It illustrates the basic premise that sex harassment is about power, not sex.”

The four plaintiffs in the case filed in federal court all had jobs that required them to call businesswoman to promote association certifications that cost as much as \$995 (mahogany-framed “Woman of the Year” plaque included). They said that the association illegally withheld commissions and bonuses if employees were late more than three times

in a quarter, or if they did not completely follow sales scripts. They are separately seeking status as a class on behalf of “at least 80” employees whose pay was docked, according to the complaint.

In addition to Ms. DeMonte, Chris Wesser, the association’s general counsel, and Matthew Proman, the association’s president, were named as defendants. Mr. Wesser referred inquiries to the group’s New York law firm, Gordon & Rees, which issued the statement.

The networking group, founded in 2007, has described itself as “America’s most inclusive network — containing nearly half a million professional women.”

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