



Former Wal-Mart worker claims sex harassment

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A former Wal-Mart employee is suing the big-box retailer, asserting she was sexually harassed by her boss and that exchanging sexual favors for better jobs was standard practice at her place of work.

Mahogany Clifton, 21, of Paterson recently filed suit in state Superior Court in Paterson against Wal-Mart and her former supervisor at the Saddle Brook store, William Reid, who is deceased.

In her civil action seeking compensation for damages, lost wages and legal fees, Clifton claims that "Reid began a campaign of sexual harassment and intimidation" against her a few months after she began working at the store in May 2002.

She said Reid touched her breasts and buttocks and made inappropriate comments about sex. Clifton also alleges Reid exposed himself in the back area of the store and offered \$50 in exchange for sex during work hours, court documents show.

In the suit she claims it was "common practice ... for supervisors to seek sexual favors from subordinates in exchange for preferential work assignments."

A Wal-Mart spokeswoman said company policy prohibits any kind of harassment or discrimination and declined to comment further.

"Out of respect for the privacy of all associates, Wal-Mart does not publicly speak about a specific claim that an associate may bring," spokeswoman Christie Gallagher said.

Clifton was fired in May 2003 for extended absences. In the suit, she claims she was dismissed shortly after she complained of harassment. Her lawyer, Mark Mulick, said she missed work because she was struggling with the situation and couldn't bring herself to come in.

"This is the worst case of sexual harassment that I've ever seen," Mulick said.

Clifton, who is black, also asserts that another supervisor, Sarah Fredericks, made disparaging racial comments to her. Clifton alleges that Fredericks used terms like "dark skin" and "nappy hair" on numerous occasions, and that Fredericks pulled off Clifton's wig in front of other co-workers.

The case is headed for a mediation session. If both sides can't reach an agreement or settlement, it will be brought to trial.

Since Reid is deceased, other testimony will be used.

"In most cases, if an accused harasser is named, they deny it happened anyway," said Joanna Grossman, a professor at Hofstra University who teaches courses on sex discrimination. "That's not where the proof is usually. In terms of the truth-finding, an outcome at trial is no less likely without the accused harasser there."

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