

Court Information Release



UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS
EASTERN DIVISION
219 SOUTH DEARBORN STREET
CHICAGO, IL 60604

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Chief Judge Appoints Counsel for Two Grand Jurors Fired From Their Jobs

Two federal grand jurors of the Northern District of Illinois separately raised claims to Chief Judge James F. Holderman that they were fired by their former employers based on their grand juror status. On a preliminary review, Chief Judge Holderman found probable merit that the former employers violated Title 18, United States Code § 1875, which forbids an employer from retaliating or discriminating against an employee based on his or her grand juror status. The statute provides, upon such a finding of probable merit, for the appointment of counsel.

In the first situation, grand juror Katherine Bregar was serving as a Case Manager at Cornerstone Services, Inc., a social service organization located in Joliet, Illinois. Ms. Bregar had worked there since May 2003. She was sworn-in as a federal grand juror on August 11, 2006 and was fired less than three weeks later on August 28, 2006.

The second grand juror who was fired from his employment is Darren Blake. He was a custodial worker at Evanston Township High School ("ETHS"). Mr. Blake had been working at ETHS since April 1998. He was sworn-in as a federal grand juror on August 28, 2006 and fired on October 24, 2006. According to Mr. Blake, on grand jury days, he was required to perform eight hours' worth of custodial work in five hours.

In both situations, each fired grand juror had been allegedly discouraged by one or more of the grand juror's superiors at the employer from participating in grand jury service. After the grand juror continued to perform jury service, the grand juror was fired.

Chief Judge Holderman said, “Jury service, whether it be on a grand jury or a trial jury, is an obligation of citizenship. Our country’s system of justice depends upon it. When jurors are summoned to jury duty, we expect them to comply. We expect, and the law requires, that their employers not interfere or retaliate against employees who are doing their civil duty as jurors by reason of that jury service.”

Although similar cases involving the statute prohibiting employers from retaliating against jurors have been brought in other parts of the country, it will be the first time such claims have been brought in Chicago, if Ms. Bregar and Mr. Blake choose to pursue their claims against their former employers in the United States District Court.

Attorney Lisa Kane has been appointed to represent Ms. Bregar and attorney Richard Gonzalez has been appointed to represent Mr. Blake. Both lawyers are experienced members of the Federal Trial Bar of the Northern District of Illinois, and both are experienced practitioners in representing plaintiffs in employment discrimination cases.

Court Information Officer Joel Daly, along with Ms. Kane and Mr. Gonzalez, will be available to respond to questions at 2:00 p.m. on Wednesday, March 14, 2007, in the designated media area of the Everett McKinley Dirksen United States Courthouse lobby.