

Racism at Customs Service prompts new lawsuit

Linn Washington Jr.
Special to Sentinel-Voice
U.S. Customs Service Commissioner Raymond Kelly vigorously practices a zero-tolerance policy against drug smugglers trying to penetrate American borders through international airports, seaports and border crossings.

However, black Customs employees argue that he does not practice a similar all-out assault attitude on the serious racial discrimination within the agency that he heads.

Employees say racism is rampant within the service, as is blatant employment discrimination, sexual harassment, prejudicial disciplinary practices and harsh retaliation against minority workers who complain about misconduct.

The failure of Kelly and other top federal officials to address the long-time problem of racist employment practices within

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—CEADA member

the Customs Service is now the subject of a class action lawsuit initiated by minority Customs employees.

Last month employees staged a demonstration in Riverside, CA. to announce the initiation of legal action by the Association of Customs Employees for Change and the Customs Employees Against Discrimination Association.

Their action parallels class action lawsuits filed against Customs by black travelers who charge the agency condones racist profiling at airports that disproportionately subjects blacks to

drug searches.

Customs employees say the discriminatory treatment of black travelers by white Customs personnel is the flip side of the workplace racism they endure.

"Threatening behavior is a common practice against 'people of color' whether they are traveling or employed with the U.S. Customs Service," noted a statement by one CEADA member submitted to congressional investigators.

Kelly recently established an independent commission to investigate the complaints of black travelers.

These complaints are currently the target of congressional hearings, extensive media coverage and numerous lawsuits.

However, he is not investigating the companion charges of racism leveled by employees, a Customs spokesman said, because these employees have other avenues of relief within the federal government unlike travelers.

"There is a mechanism already in place within government to address the whole issue of employment discrimination," said Dennis Murphy, Kelly's spokesman.

"There is a government office to investigate allegations of discrimination."

According to the workers, the government EEO system cited by Murphy is structurally ineffective and biased. The deep flaws of the EEO process became apparent when minority Customs employees from around the nation shared experiences during a strategy meeting on the lawsuit held last December.

Employees discovered: EEO officials routinely reject discrimination complaints and discourage employees from filing complaints, anonymous complainers are publicly identified for retaliation and EEO counselors face harassment for conducting unbiased investigations.

Murphy said black employee complaints about problems with the government's EEO process are "not a Customs issue."

He also said Kelly is concentrating on the "most serious" complaints, which are from black travelers.

"We need to wrestle with this issue first," Murphy said.

Kelly, according to Murphy, has ordered tougher action on employee discipline, especially on employees found guilty of practicing discrimination.

These actions are inept, black Customs employees charge, because they still do not seriously crack down on known racists within the agency.

Two months ago, Customs officials reassigned a White inspector from the Atlanta Airport who has been accused of discriminating against black travelers and employees for years.

Customs officials would have discharged this White inspector instead of demoting him if they were really serious about rooting out racists, black employees charge.

Scholarship allows poor children to attend school of choice

Special to Sentinel-Voice
A new scholarship program that will provide much-needed educational options to minority families nationwide caused a rally among national leaders from across the country.

The Children's Scholarship Fund awarded 40,000 four-year, partial scholarships to help low-income children in grades K-8 attend the school of their choice, making history as the largest private scholarship

program ever. Winners from all fifty states, which included a large percentage of African-Americans, were congratulated by CSF Chairman Ted Forstmann, Andrew Young and Martin Luther King III, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

"This is an idea whose time has come," said Young, chairman of Good Works International. "The children of the world are crying out for new methods of

education, for new opportunities. They want to learn because they know that education is freedom and opportunity."

Joining Young on the CSF National Board of Advisors to advocate educational opportunities for all are fellow civil rights leaders King III and Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women.

"All this support is clearly indicative of one thing," Forstmann said. "It's time to

help parents seek a good education wherever it can be found." He added, "More options for parents will mean more competition in education. Competition will be good for parents, for teachers, and for any school that can deliver quality." He said the CSF is in favor of competition, but does not promote any particular.

In order to apply families had to be low-income (average income was less than \$22,000) and be willing to

pay to supplement the partial scholarships. The 30 applicants - for every one scholarship showed the overwhelming demand for the scholarships.

An episode of the Oprah Winfrey show featuring CSF helped Tanya Morris, a single mother from Philadelphia, win scholarships for her twin boys. "It gives them a head-start and a great opportunity

for whatever it is that they aspire to do in their lives," she said. "I'm just so incredibly overwhelmed."

The average scholarship is worth \$1,100, with the grand total at more than \$160 million. The parents of scholarship recipients will choose the schools their children will attend, with CSF making payments directly to each institution. The average contribution will be \$1,000.

Denny's hit with another discrimination suit

BALTIMORE (AP)—A group of 30 black middle school students and their chaperones are suing Denny's for racial discrimination, saying they were mistreated at a Florida restaurant.

The lawsuit, which seeks unspecified damages, says the group from Ashburton Elementary-Middle School had to wait an excessive amount of time to be seated and served during a visit to a Denny's in Ocoee, Fla., in April 1998.

Some members also received drinks in dirty glasses, including one that appeared to have spit in the bottom, according to the lawsuit filed last week in U.S. District Court.

"The group had to wait so long for service that some of

the students actually fell asleep on their respective tables and had to be carried out of the restaurant," the lawsuit said.

Ray Hood-Phillips, chief diversity officer at South Carolina-based Advantica Restaurant Group, parent company of Denny's, said an internal inquiry turned up no evidence of wrongdoing. She said the chain "will be litigating this vigorously."

Hood-Phillips said Monday that the arrival of the large group without notice brought the restaurant "to a standstill."

Service "took too long, but there was no discrimination," she said. "We are a lightning rod for these kinds of allegations because of our history."

Denny's has been operating under a consent decree not to discriminate since reaching a \$46 million agreement with the federal government in 1994.

The consent decree settled claims by black Secret Service agents, who said they could not get breakfast at a Denny's in Annapolis while their white colleagues were served quickly.

When allegations by the Ashburton group arose a year ago, the company's president apologized to the group and promised swift action if an investigation revealed discrimination had occurred.

Marshall N. Perkins, one of the attorneys representing the group, said it was clear that Denny's had not "met the obligations it undertook" in the consent decree.



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