

St. Paul Black firefighters get affirmative action win

By Chris Nisan

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ST. PAUL, Minn. (NNPA) — The most recent episode in a long struggle over affirmative action within the St. Paul Fire Department ended on October 24 with a victory for affirmative action proponents when Ramsey County District Court Judge Steven Wheeler threw out a request for a temporary injunction to stop the hiring of new firefighters for the St. Paul Fire Department.

The injunction was sought by officials of Firefighters Union Local 21, who argued that the hiring process being used in the selection of current recruits was unfair and in violation of a 1994 agreement between the union, the city, and Black firefighters.

The heart of the dispute is whether the city should be allowed to expand the number of applicants that it considers for the available positions.

Historically, applicants were ranked on the basis of their individual test scores and a physical test — a process that Black and women firefighters have fought against as being weighted against them.

For this hiring, the department has chosen to create a ranking system that groups applicants according to similar test scores. This means, for instance, that ranking number one contains several dozen people who have scored similarly on tests. The department maintains that this is a better system be-

cause it allows more flexibility in the selection process.

The union alleges that the process is unfair and passes up qualified applicants, inferring that unqualified people will be hired over more qualified.

"Everyone in the department has a friend, relative or acquaintance who has taken that test. A lot of people have been passed over," said Patrick Flanagan, union president, in an article in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*.

A little more than 75 percent of the city's 439 firefighters are White. People of oppressed nationalities

and national minorities make up almost 37 percent of St. Paul's population.

Nathaniel Khaliq, president of the St. Paul branch of the NAACP, said in an interview that nepotism and affirmative action for White men have been the hallmark of the department's hiring policies since its inception.

"The process has been unfair all along," said Khaliq. "The process has eliminated fair and open competition to the detriment of Black firefighters."

Khaliq went on to explain that the measures being taken now are a corrective to what

has been an unjust process.

For its assertion that the union officials' suit is baseless, the St. Paul NAACP has cited as evidence the use by the city of a little-known civil service code loophole called 17c.

The 17c clause allows the city to bypass regular civil service rules for emergency hiring of municipal employees. The loophole has been used by the city on several occasions.

Khaliq explained, "99.9 percent of the 17c hires have been White males," adding, "and the union went along with it. This has been a form

of special affirmative action for White men."

Forty of the 88 finalists who passed preliminary exams are of oppressed nationalities; one is a woman. After the injunction demand was thrown out of court last week, a number of conditional offers were sent out to prospective employees.

According to figures obtained by the St. Paul NAACP, the racial composition of the new hires is 21 White males, seven Black males, four Native American males, two Latino males, one Asian male and one White female.

Adoption

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lies that don't have children, and we have families that do... and all of them can make wonderful loving families for our children who need a loving family."

An initiative started six months ago to find 600 foster or adoptive parents for 1,900 children by May of 2006 has had mixed results, and now that number has been scaled back to 400 according to Klein-Rothchild.

She added, "We set a very high target for ourselves and we've had an excellent beginning. A lot of people had expressed an interest. Many of them have made inquiries, gone through the training classes, submitted an application, and these numbers are higher than they have been in the past. All of that has been successful, but we have a long way to go to reach our projection of matching children with loving families. There are still a lot of children waiting to be adopted. We need to do more to bring more people into the fold over the next six months, and that is our top priority."

Two families engaged in the adoption process and/or foster care shared their perspective about being at the event. They also said why it is important for them to reach out and give back.

Amy Smith and her husband, Matt, are the parents of two biological children, Elijah, age 5, and Lillian, age 3, who are looking to adopt 3 siblings who have been in their care for the past seven months.

According to Smith, "We started out taking the parenting courses for our adoption licensing, and soon into the process, we met our three loving children. It's amazing that you can wake up each morning and know that you are serving a purpose, a true purpose in life — saving these three kids — and we love them like our own. It's been real wonderful seeing them grow up and becoming close to our family. The whole family is coming together. Our original plan was to adopt one child, but we fell in love with all three of these children."

The adoptive children are Kiswana Hall, age 3, Nikkoley Hall, age 2, and Georgey Hall, age 1.

Edith Craig, who is a foster parent, has had three children living with her over the past three months — Dashawn Duke, DaVaughn Duke and Corey Duke.

Craig said, "I think that there are more families out there who are able to take in foster children, and it would be in the best interest of these children to be in a stable environment. Many of these kids are in need, and it is not by choice the things that they are going through. It is the Christian thing to do, and more churches should be involved because that is something that God would expect of us. This is one of our missions in this world, to help each other and encourage each other."

To learn more information about the adoption and foster care process, please contact the Clark County Dept. of Family Services at 1-888-423-2659.

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