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Women criticize KC fire officials

By BARBARA HOLLINGSWORTH
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Kansas City has a long way to go before it reaches equitable conditions for female firefighters, according to two of those firefighters who spoke at a public forum Sunday.

The two, Kathleen Kline and Anne Wedow, appealed for the public's help in improving conditions.

"We've gone to federal court twice, and the city has continued to fight us," said Wedow, division chief of aircraft rescue firefighting for the Kansas City Fire Department. "Rather than address the issue they have continued to fight us."

In a later interview, Fire Chief Smoky Dyer, who joined the city in fall 2000, said he had worked to address concerns.

In January, a federal jury awarded \$50,000 to Kline, a battalion chief. She alleged that the department failed to provide proper equipment and separate facilities for female firefighters. The jury also ruled that the department retaliated against her because she won a sexual harassment lawsuit in 1997.

Wedow said she had a similar case that would go to federal court in April.

"They've put more time and effort into fighting us than they have into addressing the issues we have won," Wedow said during a forum at the All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church, 4501 Walnut St.

Complaints in the 1997 lawsuit focused largely on sexual harassment. Jurors were told of strip-pers at the fire station and male firefighters watching X-rated videos while on duty. Kline said the situation had improved somewhat.

Kline now is focused on the need for women's bathrooms in the fire stations and gear made specifically for women. She said each firefighter had two sets of gear, female firefighters have one set made for women and one made for men, she said.

"This is so counterproductive," she said of the court cases. "All we wanted was some female-sized gear and a bathroom. That's it."

Wedow said she had begun to see more support from local firefighter unions, but both women said they hadn't seen improvements since Dyer joined the city.

Dyer said nearly all employees of the fire Department had completed a recent round of diversity training. He also said the department recently received additional money to buy a second set of gear designed for women, which the women could have within the next three months.

Facility Improvements that

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WOMEN: Bathrooms and gear are issues

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would give women separate locker rooms and bathrooms have been slowed by the dire state of some buildings, he said. For example, he said, improvements could be quickly damaged in buildings with leaking roofs.

"It doesn't make a lot of economic sense to place locker rooms in a building that needs to be structurally be torn down," he said.

The city is working to determine which structures should be updated with women's facilities and which need to be redone entirely.

A department labor management facilities committee, which includes women, is part of the improvement process, Dyer said.

The city has allocated money to update two buildings each year, but Dyer said he thought about 30 needed changes.

Decisions about the buildings will be up to the City Council, he said.

Wedow asked the audience at the forum to contact City Council members and support changes for female firefighters. She also said they have discussed filing a complaint that the city is in violation of a court order based on the 1997 case.