

The Star-Ledger

N.J. investigating possible State Police discrimination on hiring and promotions, records show

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Jan. 5, 2020

New Jersey officials are investigating whether the state's largest police agency discriminates when hiring and promoting officers, according to documents obtained by NJ Advance Media through a public records request.

The state attorney general's office hired outside lawyers in August to review "allegations of discrimination in the employment practices of the New Jersey State Police," records show, and the Hackensack-based firm Kaufman Dolowich & Voluck has already been paid thousands of dollars for its work.

"Like any organization, the State Police is constantly working to ensure that it employs best practices and adheres to the highest standards," attorney general spokesman Steven Barnes wrote in an email. The firm is examining "hiring and promotional policies and practices" and will "offer recommendations for improvement," he said.

Barnes declined to comment on the specific allegations that prompted the ongoing review. A State Police spokesman directed questions back to the attorney general's office.

The outside investigation is led by firm partner Karol Walker. Calls to Walker's office and cell phone were not returned.

The firm submitted its first invoice in September for \$5,920, according to the records. A second invoice a month later for more than \$56,451 was pending as of Christmas Eve.

Partners at the firm are being paid \$200 an hour, associates can earn \$150 every hour and paralegals may charge \$90, according to the retention agreement.

The State Police has faced lawsuits alleging flawed promotions in the past. Leaders of the state's three trooper unions said the process was fair, especially after recent changes.

"This is a waste of taxpayer money," said Pete Stilianessis, head of the State Troopers Non-Commissioned Officers Association.

Existing safeguards helped prevent nepotism, said Wayne Blanchard, president of the State Troopers Fraternal Association, which represents rank-and-file troopers. The State Police were constantly improving, he added, including recently making in-person interviews part of the promotion process for some high-level positions.

Promotions and hiring were reviewed by the U.S. Department of Justice a decade ago. In a 2008 report, some Black and Latino troopers said the process at the time could be subjective and at risk of cronyism.

“At its worst, promotion, like discipline, can be used to discourage and deter Troopers from reporting and resisting racially-based practices,” the report said.

A judge ended federal oversight in 2009 after officials implemented sweeping reforms, and lawmakers later created an office under the attorney general to monitor the State Police.

The Hackensack firm’s lawyers are reporting to Thomas Eicher, director of the state’s Office of Public Integrity and Accountability, and Jennifer Davenport, the attorney general’s principal law enforcement advisor, according to the Aug. 12 retention agreement.

NJ Advance Media staff writer S.P. Sullivan contributed to this report.