

One of Harrison's most heated cases had her challenging a long-held practice of requiring rookie firefighters in Los Angeles to work off the clock.

"Rookies are on probation for one year and can be fired at any time for any reason," Harrison said. "As a result, supervisors and management hold tremendous power over the rookies." *Tomassi v. City of Los Angeles*, CV 08-01851 DSF, (C.D. Cal, 2008).

The practice leads to what she called a cycle of abuse.

"Many are worked to the bone, demeaned, humiliated, forced to work for free for many hours throughout the year," she said.

If they don't toe the line, they risk negative reviews and, Harrison said, possible termination.

"Therefore, rookies put their heads down and take the abuse, because, after all, shouldn't they be happy just to have the job?" she said.

During the course of the litigation, Harrison said she submitted 40 years worth of testimony from people who had been on the job back then.

"They all said, 'This is what we do, and it's still going on,'" she said.

The city eventually agreed to settle the case for \$340,000, of which \$120,000 was split among the five rookies who consented to be named plaintiffs.

The city, she said, probably paid at least as much to its attorney.

"It's just crazy," Harrison said. "If they had just straightened it out and complied with the law, they would stop spending public dollars on litigation like this."

But the case proved to be gratifying in effecting change, she said.

In a recent meeting with high-ranking chiefs from the LAFD, Harrison said, "They let me know that, as a result of me bringing the *Tomassi* case, the LAFD has in fact revised its policies and practices."

Harrison said that she devotes much of her time "trying to change the culture in fire departments," from pursuing litigation to working with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and trying to raise public awareness about illegal conduct.

Among her other significant cases,



Genie Harrison

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Harrison was co-counsel in a civil rights case against the Los Angeles Police Department for an excessive force dispute leading to injury. *Taylor-Ewing v. City of Los Angeles*, 2:07-CV-05556-GHK, (C.D. Cal.).

"These cases are infrequently litigated because they are so difficult to win, but we won a substantial verdict from a unanimous jury — \$160,300 plus \$300,000 in attorney fees," she said.

She also litigated and settled a case on behalf of a firefighter/police officer who worked at the Ontario airport, which is run by Los Angeles World Airports. *Ortiz v. Los Angeles World Airports*, BC399941, (L.A. Super. Ct., filed Oct. 14, 2008).

At issue were claims of actual and perceived disability discrimination and harassment, failure to accommodate and failure to engage in the interactive process.

The case was successfully settled, Harrison said, and LAWA agreed to have an independent analyst assess and advise regarding changes to its policies and practices.

Harrison also has been litigating a wage-and-hour class action on behalf of mental health workers, nurses and others at Aurora Behavioral Health Center's mental health hospitals, alleging chronic understaffing that forces employees to work off the clock, consequently endangering patients, she said. *Alberts v. Aurora Behavioral Health Center*, BC419340, (L.A. Super. Ct., filed Aug. 6, 2009.)

— Pat Broderick