

NEWS > EDUCATION · News

Two ex-UCR professors win \$6 million in whistleblower lawsuit

They alleged retaliation after complaining about supervisor, who they said misused funds, broke policy

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Two former UC Riverside professors were awarded more than \$6 million in a whistleblower lawsuit against the UC Regents and their former department chair.

Jeannie Lochhead and Michele Nelson, who worked in the Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience, alleged in the suit that they were retaliated against by department Chair Gerald Maguire after they alleged that he violated policy and misused funds.

Maguire could not be reached for comment this week. Spokespersons for UC Riverside and the University of California declined to comment.

The two professors reported Maguire separately to UCR officials, alleging misuse of state funds, economic waste, pharmaceutical conflicts of interest, billing fraud at UCR Health and patient safety issues.

Maguire, a professor and chair of the department in the UCR School of Medicine, came to the university in 2014 from UC Irvine.

Nelson and Lochhead alleged they were subjected to harassment from Maguire as well as demotions and salary reductions after their complaints, which pushed them to resign from the university.

A Riverside Superior Court jury awarded Nelson \$5.7 million in damages and \$400,000 to Lochhead on June 27. The trial started May 17.

Nelson, who worked at UCR from 2017 to 2021, first raised concerns to Maguire and then UCR officials, alleging that Maguire had conflicts of interest with pharmaceutical companies, used inappropriate billing practices, misused a \$15 million state grant and created patient safety issues.

In the suit, she alleges that after her complaints, she was removed from her position as vice chair of the department, received a reduction in salary and was excluded from meetings and committees.

Nelson was awarded the higher sum after the jury found that she suffered a loss of income and that Maguire had created a working situation that made her leave, attorney Ivan Puchalt said.

"In other words, a reasonable person would not have stayed under the same circumstances," Puchalt said.

Lochhead, who worked at the university from 2016 to 2021, was removed from her program director post after filing a report with UCR officials against Maguire and took a significant pay cut, Puchalt said.

"Well, just kind of big, big picture, the University of California, they really do have some of the best whistleblower protection laws and statutes in the entire country, but they're only as good as the enforcement," Puchalt said.

He said the university chose to protect Maguire rather than Nelson and Lochhead.

"At its core, that's really what this case is about," Puchalt said. "And we're hopeful that they'll follow the policy and do more to protect whistleblowers, so that people are encouraged to come forward if they see wrongdoing, which is what the university wants people to do. But university employees aren't going to come forward unless they feel protected, right, protected from retaliation."

Nelson and Lochhead have since opened their own private practice in Riverside.

"For me, it's completely different," Lochhead said. "I spent my whole life thinking I would have an academic career, and so it was devastating."

Lochhead spent five years in academia after completing her residency at UC Irvine.

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Nelson said the trial and the harassment she alleges occurred were difficult and emotional.

"I'm grateful it's done," Nelson said. "I hope that it resolves the university to make some positive changes."

Nelson worked in academics for four years, she completed her residency and a fellowship at UC Irvine.

The University of California could appeal, Puchalt said.

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