

Texas Air Traffic Controller Files Claim Against FAA

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An air traffic controller who told authorities that the Federal Aviation Administration covered up safety issues at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport has filed a discrimination claim charging the agency with refusing to promote her because of her complaints.

Anne Whiteman is seeking at least \$745,000 in damages and \$250,000 for medical expenses in the case filed with a federal board that handles retaliation claims.

Whiteman said air traffic controllers at the Texas airport sometimes let planes get too close to each other, then covered up the safety issues by blaming the incidents on pilot error or saying they never happened.

Whiteman, who has worked at the airport for more than 25 years, first reported the safety issue to superiors in 1998. She said in the claim that she was removed from her job in the radar room in a move widely considered a demotion, and continually denied advancement. She also said she was subject to harassment including an attempt to run her car off the road.

Lynn Tierney, a spokeswoman for the FAA, said the agency couldn't comment because it didn't know about the filing until getting a call from The Associated Press.

"However, there is no place in the FAA for mistreatment of individuals who bring forward critical information related to our operations," Tierney said. "We do not retaliate and won't condone it in any form."

Whiteman's lawyer, Ariel Solomon, said the FAA offered to settle the case for less than \$50,000, but Whiteman rejected the offer.

The claim was filed with the Dallas office of the Merit Systems Protection Board.

The Transportation Department's inspector general and the Office of Special Counsel, a federal agency that protects whistle-blowers, backed up Whiteman's complaints in reports released last week. They said the problem of falsely classifying incidents when aircraft got too close to each other was eight times greater at DFW than at other airports nationwide.

The inspector general recommended that seven FAA managers at DFW Airport be removed, and last week an FAA spokeswoman said that had been done.

The acting special counsel also wrote to President George W. Bush and congressional leaders last week, saying that the FAA needs more scrutiny to make sure corrective measures have been taken.

In an interview, Whiteman disputed the FAA's contention that it has fixed the problems at DFW Airport, including management changes. She said some of the former managers still come to work while on leave.

Whiteman charged that the harassment against her put the public in danger. She said on at least one occasion, a hostile co-worker ordered a plane into the path of an aircraft she was guiding "to try to scare me."

"It's extremely dangerous, and to have FAA characterize these as minor instances" is wrong, she said.

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