

VERMONT EXPERIENCES RISING SETTLEMENTS WITH STATE EMPLOYEES



For the last five years, Vermont has used nearly \$1 million on state worker settlement claims in regards to misconduct, sexual harassment, wrongful dismissal and discrimination. The Office of Risk Management found that at least 21 instances where Vermont has made a financial agreement with a worker to avert possible lawsuits. The biggest settlement was ponied up in October of 2008. An Agency of Transportation worker that claimed gender discrimination settled for \$300,000. The lowest amount ever paid out was \$475. This was also in 2008 to another worker in the transportation department. A spokesperson for the Department of Human Resources states that Vermont approached all of the 21 instances unobtrusively as they tried to avoid legal action. Anytime public money is used for a settlement, it becomes a viewable record to the public. Vermont does not permit confidentiality pacts disallowing workers to speak about the issue. State workers can't make their conundrum public because their content is usually sensitive information. The Human Rights Commission of Vermont believes insufficient training of department heads is one of the reasons for such instances. The most common disputes are in regard to harassment and a lack of worker promotions, sex and race as well as disabled workers. The Commission also believes the transportation agencies and the Department of Corrections are at fault because their employees consist mostly of the male gender. The two divisions have totaled four settlements. The Agency of Transportation believes they have come under fire due to their size as one of the state's biggest workplaces with approximately 1,300 workers. One case that came under their umbrella was that of Maureen McCaffrey. McCaffrey was the only female employee at a garage in Morrisville. She claimed to have been harassed by male garage workers and believes she was denied a bump in job title because she was a female. Former Governor Jim Douglas believes the total figure of settlements is merely due to the size of Vermont's government, making it a pure numbers game. Douglas wouldn't comment if the public should be concerned but did state that the situation should be supervised carefully if it gets out of control. Douglas also believes that the money the state spends on such disputes is a small amount when compared to other Vermont expenses. He states it comes down to whether or not the cost of such legal action is worth the money and time as opposed to making a settlement which will definitely save time and may save money.