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# Federal jury orders Department of Veterans Affairs to pay \$3.7-million for retaliation at Bay Pines hospital

By William R. Levesque, Times Staff Writer

TAMPA - A federal jury on Thursday decided the Department of Veterans Affairs retaliated against four employees at its Bay Pines hospital in St. Petersburg and awarded them \$3.73-million in damages.

The four employees, three of them doctors, accused the VA of a broad pattern of discrimination against employees who file employment discrimination complaints.

During a three-week trial in U.S. District Court, the plaintiffs said they were denied bonuses, promotions, desired assignments and that the VA made their work lives generally miserable after they filed gender discrimination claims.

The VA denied the charges by the employees - physicians Claudia Cote, 48, Diane Gowski, 48, Sally Zachariah, 56, and former administrative officer Roxanne Lainhart, 38. All still work for the VA but fear they may eventually be fired.

Plaintiffs' attorney Joe Magri argued that VA leadership tried to discourage employment discrimination claims by retaliating against the women.

No immediate word from the VA on whether it will appeal the verdict. Under federal law, the VA's liability is limited for emotional damages so the verdict is expected to be reduced by \$2.4-million even without an appeal.



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