

Hearing to resume on firefighter demotion

Contributed by TSITSI D. WAKHISI (Special to South Florida Times)
Thursday, 31 January 2013
Last Updated Thursday, 31 January 2013

MIAMI -- A Miami-Dade Fire Rescue captain whose April 2012 Facebook remarks sparked outcries from other department officers, African-American leaders and County Mayor Carlos Gimenez will face a second day of a what some are calling a "backdoor hearing" on whether to lift his demotion and restore his rank and salary.

Brian Beckmann was demoted from captain to firefighter after he posted a disparaging comment in the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin shooting. The Miami Gardens teenager was killed Feb. 26 in Sanford, by George Zimmerman, a Hispanic neighborhood watch guard. Zimmerman, citing Florida's "stand your ground" law, said he shot Trayvon, who was unarmed, in self-defense.

On April 11, when State Attorney Angela Corey announced she would file second-degree murder charges against Zimmerman over Trayvon's death, Beckmann, who is white, wrote, in part, on his Facebook page: "I and my co-workers could rewrite the book on whether our urban youths are victims of racist profiling or products of their failed, shitbag, ignorant, pathetic welfare-dependent excuses for parents."

The comment, which was seen by other firefighters, circulated throughout the department and eventually went viral on the Internet, prompting at least six organizations to call for Beckmann's resignation.

"Public safety employees such as Brian Beckmann have no place in public service whose responsibility is to save lives of all races," Walter Clark wrote in an April 20 certified letter to William Bryson, director of Miami-Dade Fire Rescue. Clark is president and CEO of Special Consultant for African-American Government Employees (SCAAGE), one of groups that met with Jimenez on May 30.

Beckmann, who earned \$108,925 annually before he was demoted as captain, now earns \$89,771 as a firefighter. Represented by the firefighters union, Beckmann is seeking to reverse the demotion through an appeal process, which began Jan. 14 and will continue on Tuesday, Feb. 5.

"I was offended as an individual and as a mayor," Gimenez testified at the first appeal hearing in the Stephen P. Clark Government Center in downtown Miami. Demoting Beckmann, the mayor said, "sends a message to the fire department and the public as a whole that we take it very seriously."

The hearing before arbitrator Mark Lurie was packed with firefighters in support of Beckmann and with others, including current and retired black firefighters and representatives of community organizations.

"Citizens from the black community will not be absent during the appeal hearing so the county cannot sweep those disparaging, racist and hurtful comments under the rug," the Rev. Nathaniel Wilcox wrote in a press release that was circulated in South Florida's black communities prior to the hearing.

"The demotion must stand and not be reversed," wrote Wilcox, president of People United to Lead the Struggle for Equality (PULSE).

So many witnesses were scheduled to speak against Beckmann that Lurie, a member of the National Academy of Arbitrators, ordered the second day of testimony which will begin at 9 a.m. Tuesday on the 18th floor of the Stephen B. Clark Center, 111 NW First St.

Among the people testifying at the initial hearing was Trayvon's uncle, Ronald Fulton. Fulton said that firefighters, as first responders, need to be trusted that they will respond without prejudice in any community.

"You look to them for help," Fulton said. "Do I think he would help me from this statement? No."

He added that Beckmann's comments about women on welfare were unfounded, especially as they related to Trayvon's mother, Sybrina Fulton, a county employee.

"How can you lead others with that attitude?" asked John D. Pace Jr., a retired Miami-Dade police lieutenant and executive director of the Federation of Black Employees, which led the call for Beckmann's termination.

Matthew J. Mierzwa Jr., who represents the firefighters' union, described Beckmann at the hearing as a conscientious public servant with an "impeccable service record and an impeccable record in disadvantaged areas."

Beckmann, a firefighter since 1997, did not violate the county's social media policy, Mierzwa said. Beckmann's post did not identify him as a county employee or captain. Nor was the post sent while Beckmann was on duty or sent from county property.

"Simply put, Miami-Dade County is not in the business of regulating speech" on an employee's own time – even if others find it offensive, Mierzwa said.

At the hearing, Beckmann and his supporters declined to answer questions from a South Florida Times reporter. Beckmann said he would consider responding once the hearing ends. Witnesses for Beckmann will be heard at Tuesday's hearing.