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## Fire Chief Goes Easy on Accused Harasser

BY NINA HERNANDEZ, FEBRUARY 9, 2019, 7:00AM, NEWSDESK

Less than three months into his tenure, Austin Fire Chief **Joel Baker**'s handling of a harassment case has been called into question. Baker released a disciplinary memo on Jan. 11 suspending Fire Captain **Roger Scarcliff** for a single day over his "discourtesy" to a fellow employee and violation of department rules.

The incident in question happened after an October anti-harassment presentation by Captain **Christine Jones**, who accused Scarcliff of bombarding her with a series of sexist remarks almost as soon as the course – mandated by Baker – was completed. As reported by Jones, the comments included singling her out when the group was conversing about cars; Scarcliff reportedly asked if Jones would rather "talk about hair, makeup, or clothes," and made a brilliant "women should be cleaning and dusting" joke. He also referenced a harassment training in the TV show *The Office* and said, according to the memo, "Tomorrow [Jones is] going to teach us a class on the difference between a bitch and a whore."

When questioned about the matter by the department's **Professional Standards Office**, Scarcliff didn't deny the comments but said he was trying to include Jones in the group's camaraderie, not isolate her with harassing behavior. (He also disputed on which day the offensive remarks were made.) Furthermore, he blamed his use of profanity on Jones, who he said also cursed on the job and undermined his ability to stay on the straight and narrow.

Apparently, Baker thought this was a convincing excuse, giving Scarcliff just one day of suspension. He said he took Scarcliff at his word and felt his apology to Jones had been sincere, though he did say Scarcliff would be "on notice" for that kind of behavior in the future.

Jones does not agree, releasing a statement through the **Austin Firefighters Association** slamming the closed-door process. She said she had been denied a chance to explain her point of view to department leadership or to even have a woman present when Scarcliff was questioned. "It is unconscionable that the Fire Chief would conclude that unwelcome and unsolicited statements attacking someone's gender and insinuating that a woman is a bitch and a whore is merely horseplay." Neither Baker nor the City Manager's office provided comment when contacted by the *Chronicle*.

Mayor Pro Tem **Delia Garza**, a former firefighter who keeps a close eye on department issues, was likewise not impressed. "The memo of the incident seems to clearly illustrate that Captain Jones was subject to jeers based on her gender," she told the *Chronicle*. "It's disappointing to read that this incident was dismissed as horseplay. It reminds me of justification of harassment as 'locker room talk.' I know that the great majority of Austin firefighters

conduct themselves in a very professional manner and I hope future similar incidents are taken more seriously and people are held accountable for their actions.”

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