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Lawsuit: County housing group chief refuses to step aside

CEO of Fair Housing Council has changed locks, kept board members out, court petition says.

By **RACHANEE SRISAVASDI**

The Orange County Register

SANTA ANA – The chief executive officer of the Fair Housing Council of Orange County has been placed on administrative leave for allegedly interfering with an outside investigation into allegations of mismanagement and misuse of public funds but refuses to step aside, according to a lawsuit filed Friday.

D. Elizabeth Pierson, who has been in charge of the Santa Ana-based nonprofit organization for more than eight years, was placed on leave Feb. 22, but has since

refused to acknowledge the action, even changing the locks of the agency's office and refusing to let board members in, according to the Orange County Superior Court petition.

The lawsuit – brought by eight purported board members – asks a judge to acknowledge they have the power to remove Pierson.

But on Tuesday, Commissioner Jane D. Myers denied a temporary restraining order sought by the board members to restrict Pierson from entering the agency's office, interfering with the investigation or conducting any business on behalf of the agency.

Deborah Reisdorph, an attorney for the board members, said the commissioner's ruling enabled her to re-file the restraining order request, which will be heard by another Orange County judicial officer later this month.

In a declaration filed Tuesday, Pierson maintains she did not interfere with the investigation and refuses to recognize those board members suing her – Wayne Ward, Christine McGuire, Gregory Brown, Earl Dearing, Jeffrey Bird, Emma Hightower, Aidee Lopez and Raymond Rodgers — maintaining they are simply advisory board members and do not have power over her employment.

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Pierson also spoke of the investigation, saying the probe dealt with claims of a "disgruntled" former employee who attempted to extort money from the agency by threatening to go to the board.

The employee, Hani Bushra, "became irate ... that he did not receive his December 2007 bonus," Pierson stated.

"Knowing I had done nothing wrong, I refused to give in to the extortion attempt," Pierson said, adding she referred the matter to the board.

Reisdorph declined to elaborate on the outside investigation, though she said some claims did involve the allegations made by the former employee.

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