

Thursday, June 12, 2008

Fair Housing CEO placed on unpaid leave

Board members and lawyers for D. Elizabeth Pierson will try to mediate legal disputes.

By RACHANEE SRISAVASDI
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Comments 22 | Recommended 5

SANTA ANA – The executive director of the Fair Housing Council of Orange County – who is at the center of ongoing litigation involving allegations of mismanagement and fraud -- has been placed on unpaid administrative leave.

D. Elizabeth Pierson, who has run the Santa Ana-based agency since 1999, said Thursday that she got a letter last week informing her of the board's decision.

"They made a decision and did they execute it in the best way? I don't think so," Pierson said. "When you make decisions regarding changing management, it's better to do it openly."

She also questioned the board's call to push her aside without naming a replacement.

"I very much care about the viability of this organization," Pierson said. "I don't want to see it go down."

Deborah Reisdorph, an attorney for the board, declined to comment, citing a court order that forbids the board from talking about issues involving the probe. She did say the board has agreed to place a staff member as a signatory – given Pierson's departure.

In March, the board sued Pierson, saying she was interfering in the board's investigation into accusations that Pierson mismanaged the agency's money, resulting in misuse of public funds and fraud.

The allegations have prompted some cities to re-examine their relationship with the agency – which is tasked with providing legal representation and advice to residents who rent. For example, Mission Viejo has hired a similar agency in Long Beach for such work.

Pierson, who earns an \$87,372 annual salary, disputes the accusations, and fought being placed on leave, alleging the agency would suffer from her absence. She also counter-sued the board, alleging its members acted improperly by suing her instead going first to mediation.

Both sides – who were in court Thursday for a brief hearing -- will meet again today for a mediation session.

Contact the writer: 714-834-3773 or rsrisavasdi@ocregister.com