

SUSSMAN & WATKINS

- Attorneys at Law -

MICHAEL H. SUSSMAN
CHRISTOPHER D. WATKINS
JOHN L. WESLOWSKI

55 MAIN ST. - SUITE 6
P.O. BOX 1005
GOSHEN, NEW YORK 10924

LEGAL ASSISTANTS:
SONNIA VAN HAASTER
JONATHAN GOLDMAN

PARALEGAL:
CLAIRE PAPELL

(845) 294-3991

Fax: (845) 294-1623

sussman1@frontiernet.net

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For more information, contact Christopher D. Watkins, Esq. @ (845) 294-3991 (office)/ (845) 204-5520 (cell)/ Email: chris_sussman1@frontiernet.net

WHITE PLAINS JURY AWARDS FORMER PEEKSKILL HOUSING AUTHORITY DIRECTOR \$1 MILLION DOLLARS

On Wednesday, a federal jury determined that former Peekskill Housing Authority Director, Gheevarghese "Thomas" Thankachan, was unlawfully terminated from his position as head of the Peekskill Housing Authority (PHA), and awarded him \$1 million in damages. Thankachan was terminated as Director of the PHA in September 2007. At the time, PHA Board Acting Chairperson Leesther Brown gave various reasons for the termination. Thankachan sued, claiming that Brown had unjustly orchestrated his removal and that she was motivated by national origin discrimination-he is from India-and his perceived political affiliation, because she believed that he was too closely aligned with Peekskill's Democratic party. The federal jury found that Brown discriminated against Thankachan based on his ethnicity and that she influenced other PHA Board members to remove him without a legitimate justification.

Until his termination, Thankachan was a Horatio Alger success story. He came to the United States from India as a young man and began at the PHA in 1983 as an account clerk. He received several promotions over the next several years, obtaining a law degree in 1994 after going to law school at night and on weekends. In 1998, he was appointed as the PHA staff attorney. In 2003, when William Shands, the long-time PHA Director died, the Board appointed Thankachan as Executive Director.

In late 2006, HUD, the federal agency which funds and regulates public housing authorities, recognized Thankachan and the PHA with awards for exemplary service to residents and outstanding management. Nonetheless, shortly thereafter, Brown and three close friends she recruited to the Board suspended Thankachan. Other Board members objected and hundreds of residents signed a petition to remove Brown and keep Thankachan. However, Brown remained and she and her three recruits voted to terminate Thankachan in September 2007.

According to Thankachan's attorney, there was ample evidence at trial of race or national origin discrimination, particularly derogatory comments that Brown made regarding Thankachan about his ethnicity. The attorney, Christopher Watkins from the law firm of Sussman & Watkins in Goshen, said: "This verdict is a complete vindication of Gheevarghese "Thomas" Thankachan. After Mr. Thankachan was terminated in late 2007, he did not sit at home and sulk. At the age of 54, during a deep economic recession, he started his own law practice. He has gradually built that practice into a success. That is the type of person he is. He gave his heart

and soul to the Peekskill Housing Authority and was much loved by staff and residents alike. His attitude over the last four years has been to focus on the positive rather than the negative. ”

In addition to finding that the PHA and Brown discriminated against Thankachan based on his ethnicity, the jury found that Brown was also influenced by Thankachan’s perceived political affiliation. Yet, it also found that was not a primary reason for his termination.

In addition to \$1 million in compensatory damages, the jury awarded punitive damages against Brown personally in the amount of \$250. Watkins said that he invited a low punitive damages award in his closing statement in recognition of the fact that Brown is of modest economic means and that Thankachan was not seeking to punish her. “He wanted justice, not vengeance,” Watkins said, “and that’s exactly what this jury delivered.”