



HAMMONTON INDEPENDENT VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANY

Station No. 2

51 N. White Horse Pike

Hammonton NJ 08037

For Immediate Release
Tuesday, October 23, 2018

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Written and Submitted by: Dr. Joe Lizza, Lieutenant/Secretary, Hammonton Independent Vol. Fire Co. 2

Hammonton, NJ - On Tuesday, October 23rd, 2018 the Hammonton Independent Volunteer Fire Company, Station 2 and four of its members represented by Lou Barbone of Jacobs and Barbone, PA prevailed in its lawsuit against the Town of Hammonton regarding action under the New Jersey Civil Rights Act for a violation of the members equal protection rights under the NJ Constitution.

The ruling included compensatory damages totaling \$80,000 to the four individual members who filed the suit in January 2016. The courts are still reviewing the possibility for additional punitive damages and should have a decision reached later this week.

The ruling was reached by a jury of their peers at the Atlantic County Civil Courthouse in Atlantic City with the honorable Christine Smith presiding over the trial which began on Monday, October 15th. The jury found that the Town of Hammonton did not properly follow its own procedures for handling accusations of this magnitude. The town has continuously argued very adamantly that volunteers are not entitled to equal protection and/or constitutional rights guaranteed in the United States Constitution.

In September 2015 the Town of Hammonton suspended several members of the fire company after supposedly receiving allegations of harassing and/or threatening behavior. At that time members of the fire company were only notified of these allegations after being publicly humiliated in a televised council meeting and subsequent newspaper articles. A hearing for the accused was finally provided by the town only after filing a lawsuit in January of 2016 and being ordered to do so by Judge Julio Mendez. During the hearings, which didn't occur until 2017 these allegations were found to be false after Retired Judge Michael Winklestein found a majority of the allegations unsubstantiated and accusers not credible.

The leadership of the fire company fully cooperated with the Town of Hammonton including Mayor DiDonato, Solicitors Brian Howell and Michael Malinsky during what they as well as the courts considered a questionable three-year investigation. We have continuously espoused that the truth will be brought to light and that we would stand alongside our members, many of whom have over twenty-five years of service to the community.

We believe that respectful and professional conduct furthers our organizations mission. We expect every member to show respect for each other and the community which they serve. The fire company is committed to providing an environment that is free of discrimination, including harassment.

We have continuously ensured that the safety of the residents of Hammonton has not been affected by the situation. The fire company and its active membership which is at a longtime high of 37 members will continue to serve the residents of Hammonton as they have been since 1896.

We are optimistic that the fire company will become stronger after this long-awaited ruling and the Town of Hammonton will reconsider the manner which they support their dedicated volunteers.

For additional information, please contact the fire company directly at 609-567-4330 or hammontonfire2@gmail.com.

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