

Former Wayne State veterinarian says she was fired for defending animals

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A former Wayne State University veterinarian is suing the school's board of governors and three officials in federal court, saying she was fired for demanding better conditions for research animals.

"I loved my job. It was my whole life," said Karen Hrapkiewicz, 62, of Dearborn Heights. "I was wronged, and this should not be allowed to happen to another person."

A university lawyer and one of the defendants in the case, Dorothy Nelson, associate vice president for research, declined to comment on the allegations.

Hrapkiewicz (pronounced RAP-KEVICH) said her problems began about three years ago after the university appointed Nelson to work with the school's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee.

Such committees are federally mandated and found at research facilities nationwide. They oversee the health and welfare of

research animals.

The committees are supposed to investigate complaints about the care and use of research animals and report serious violations to the Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare at the U.S. Institutes of Health. Universities can lose federal research funds for violations.

Hrapkiewicz said WSU does a good job of caring for research animals, but problems occasionally crop up. She said Nelson discouraged discussing and trying to resolve the problems at meetings in an effort to minimize them.

The problems included cramming too many rats into a small room at the Kresge Eye Institute, creating an "appalling" odor problem. The suit said food for the animals was stored in unsanitary conditions, and nurses and hospital workers were exposed to rat dander.

When Hrapkiewicz and the school's compliance and training officer, Patricia





Denison, continued to push such issues at meetings, Hrapkiewicz said, Nelson forced Denison out of her job and eventually used four minor misconduct incidents --including conducting class on a snow day -- to fire Hrapkiewicz.

Denison wouldn't comment on the suit. Neither would the Kresge Eye Institute.

Hrapkiewicz's lawyer, Michael Pitt of Royal Oak, said his client is a national expert on animal care and training students in veterinary technology. He said she wrote a textbook used worldwide to teach clinical laboratory animal medicine and has won numerous awards for her work.

"We gave the university every opportunity to correct this situation, and they didn't," he said.

He said the university violated Hrapkiewicz's free speech and denied her due process by refusing to grant her a hearing to clear her name.

Hrapkiewicz wants U.S. District Judge Patrick Duggan to reinstate her to her \$126,312-a-year job and award her compensatory and punitive damages.

The Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare said it was unaware of the lawsuit and couldn't comment.

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