

Government ordered to reinstate U.S. Park Police chief

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Washington (CNN) -- Seven years after the federal government fired the chief of the U.S. Park Police, an appeals panel Tuesday ordered that she be restored to the job and be given back pay.

In a 53-page opinion, the Merit Systems Protection Board ruled that Teresa Chambers had wrongly been dismissed for complaining about budget cuts to the Washington Post. It ordered the government to restore her to a job she last held in December 2003.

Chambers must resume her old post in the next 20 days, the board ruled. Her former position is currently occupied.

"I intend to go back. That's what this has been all about from the start," Chambers told CNN.

Since 2008, Chambers has been chief of the Riverdale Park Police Department in Maryland, a department with about 20 officers. She said she's already informed the mayor of Riverdale Park that she may be returning to her old job. She said, "He understood when he hired me," that she may be returning to her old position.

The Department of Interior could appeal the decision, but Tuesday evening declined to reveal its next step.

"We're reviewing the decision and cannot make any additional comments at this time," said National Park Service spokesman David Barna.

The U.S. Park Police, consisting of some 800 officers, falls under the Park Service and protects public lands in Washington, D.C., New York and San Francisco. It is most prominent in Washington, where Park Police officers patrol the National Mall and numerous monuments.

Chambers's dismissal was the result of an interview with the Washington Post in which she argued the department needed an additional \$8 million. On the day the article was published, the Deputy Director of the National Park Service, Donald Murphy, sent Chambers an e-mail instructing her not to grant any more interviews without approval. Two days later, Murphy placed Chambers on administrative leave and proposed her firing on six grounds, all relating to the statements about the budget.

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), a public interest group, championed her cause, casting Chambers as a dedicated public servant who was fired for making comments protected by federal whistle-blower statutes.

Jeff Ruch, executive director of the group, said Tuesday he was celebrating the ruling. Ruch said it was unlikely the government would appeal the ruling, saying federal courts had twice sided with the board. "Taking it back a third time would really be pushing your luck," he said.

The ruling orders the Department of Interior to pay Chambers back pay, interest and legal fees -- an amount that will total about \$2 million, Ruch said.

Chambers told CNN she was "stunned" by the decision and that "It was a long time coming." She added she was "overwhelmingly grateful that the Merit Systems Protection Board made the right decision."