

Fired Park Police chief ordered reinstated

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 12 (UPI) -- U.S. officials ordered the Park Police to reinstate former Chief Teresa Chambers nearly eight years after her firing for voicing fears about staffing shortages.

The Merit Systems Protection Board, an independent U.S. agency established to protect federal employees from partisan political and other prohibited personnel practices, ordered the Park Police Tuesday to restate Chambers within 20 days, The Washington Post reported. The board said Chambers, currently Riverdale, Md., police chief, is entitled to retroactive pay starting from July 2004 and to have her legal fees paid back.

The board said it found insufficient evidence she violated federal rules regarding public statements on budget and staffing issues.

Chambers told the Post in 2003 her 600-member department needed 800 more officers to carry out its duties. The force protects National Park Service lands and monuments on the National Mall in Washington, as well sites in New York and California.

She was accused of improperly lobbying Congress, disclosing secret budget deliberations and failing to follow the chain of command. The Bush administration removed her, citing six charges -- two of which were dismissed by an administrative law judge, and one of which was dismissed by the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington last April. The board dismissed the other three.

Chambers told the Post Tuesday she was stunned by the decision -- about 1 percent of appeals to the board result in reinstatement -- but said she considered the ruling "precedent-setting for other civil servants."

"One of the questions has been, Can a federal employee be fired for telling the truth, and this case will lay the groundwork for the future," she said.

The National Park Service, which oversees the Park Police, had no immediate comment.

Current police Chief Salvatore Lauro, leading the force since January 2009, by law would have to step down to make room for Chambers, Chambers' lawyers said. Lauro could not be reached for comment Tuesday night.

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