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Yuba dispute hits U.S. court
Chief medical officer claims his religion sparked animosity.

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--The turmoil that has engulfed Yuba County's health and welfare services for more than a year has landed in federal court in Sacramento.

The county's chief medical officer, Dr. Joseph Cassady, who was accused of being a drug dealer by another county official and then cleared, stepped up his counteroffensive with a lawsuit against the county, one of its supervisors and three of its former officials.

Cassady, a fourth-generation native of the area, contends that the defendants' deep-seated antipathy toward his Christian beliefs and associations prompted a smear campaign meant to run him out of office and out of the county.

"The integrity that goes along with being a Christian was threatening to them," Cassady said in an interview Wednesday.

Three defendants - Mike Noda, who directed the county's Health and Human Services Department, and his two top aides, Beverly Craig and Carolyn Williams - have all been fired by the Board of Supervisors as a result of their clash with Cassady.

Defendant Mary Jane Griego, accused by Cassady of conspiring with the trio, is still a member of the board.

Sacramento attorney Jill Telfer, who represents Noda, Craig and Williams, said her clients are preparing to sue the county and Cassady.

"They had a good-faith belief that he was violating the law, they did what they thought was necessary, and they were retaliated against," she said.

Cassady discriminated against Craig, who is African American, based on her race, and against Williams based on her gender, Telfer said.

Her clients "don't have a problem with (Cassady's) religious views," she insisted. Their problem is with the way he blurs the line between those views and his official duties, she added.

Noda, Craig and Williams have formed a consulting service specializing in government grants and legislative programs.

Craig said she and her colleagues "are the ones who have suffered due to misconduct, corruption and cover-up by the county. It's awful that residents have to pay the price.

"To tell you the truth, I'm a little fed up with this guy's crap," Craig said of Cassady. "He's a crafty, intelligent strategist, very manipulative."

Yuba County Counsel Daniel Montgomery was unavailable for comment, and County Administrator Kent McClain did not return calls.

Griego, who is a waitress at her father's Olivehurst eatery, Duke's Diner, said she is "happy the true story will finally come out," but she lamented the suit as "an unfortunate distraction from real issues the county must deal with."

"It's one thing to sue, it's another to win," she observed. Cassady "is still working. If there are damages, I'd like to see them."

Cassady alleges his constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, due process and equal protection were trampled. He seeks an unspecified amount of monetary compensation.

The suit was filed Tuesday by Sacramento attorney Bradley Benbrook, a member of the **Stevens & O'Connell** firm headed by two former U. S. attorneys. It comes after the county rejected Cassady's \$4 million administrative claim.

Formal claims by Noda, Craig and Williams have also been rebuffed by the county.

Cassady recounts three incidents in his suit that he says illustrates the "vicious" nature of the campaign against him.

In the summer of 2001, the suit says, Rev. Michael Sterling was convinced by Noda, Craig and political activist Edward Fleming to sign a letter to the state Osteopathic Medical Board complaining about the conduct of Cassady, who is an osteopath.

Before the letter was sent to the state board, but after Sterling had given it to Noda, Sterling and Cassady settled their differences, the suit says. Sterling delivered a written withdrawal of his complaint to County Counsel Montgomery, it says.

The defendants were all aware of the withdrawal, yet Noda sent the letter to the state board, the suit alleges. When Sterling learned of this, he notified the board that the letter was sent without his knowledge.

Noda wrote to the state Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement (BNE) in January asking for an investigation of Cassady's "unlawful practices," and citing "his distribution of narcotic drugs from the Yuba County jail and the Twin Cities Rescue Mission." Griego made the same allegations in a follow-up telephone call to state Attorney General Bill Lockyer.

Spokesman Nathan Barankin said Wednesday that Lockyer "passed it on to BNE with no instruction except to do what they do - that is, check things out." There followed a joint investigation of Cassady by BNE and the federal Drug Enforcement Administration. In a March letter to Noda with copies to Griego and Yuba County Sheriff Virginia Black, Lockyer reported that the probe "failed to reveal any factual basis in support of (the) allegations."

While the investigation exonerated him, Cassady said in the interview "there will always be a stain on my reputation. It put a tremendous strain on my whole family. I had to defend myself against groundless charges. It ruined my credibility with patients."

The suit says that Noda contacted Cassady on Feb. 23, the day after Noda was placed on paid administrative leave, and "admitted that he made untrue allegations about Cassady. Noda said he hoped to be able to tell Cassady more. ... 'in about six months.' " Asked about this Wednesday, Noda would only say: "That will be real clear in the courtroom. I'm confident this lawsuit is going to be found totally baseless."

The suit also alleges that Craig wrote an anonymous letter in December to the state Department of Health Services accusing Cassady of multiple sources of undisclosed income.

Craig declined Wednesday to comment on the letter.

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