

Battling against inequities of rank

4 female commanders sue over their own space

By Ralph Ranalli, Globe Staff | June 24, 2004

State Police Sergeant Susan Rottenberg's break room at Logan International Airport has a panoramic view of Boston's skyline. Unfortunately, it also has a steering wheel, a police radio, and a clutter of other electronic equipment that make it hard to find a place to put her lunch.

The 23 male State Police sergeants at Logan have no such issues. Their locker and lounge features three plush La-Z-Boy-style recliners, a couch, a telephone for personal calls, a refrigerator, and a satellite television hookup. Rottenberg has been offered use of the area, but she said she has refused because she would have to walk through an area where the men change their clothes.

"It's like I'm a homeless person," said the 22-year veteran of the department as she strolled the brick waterfront walkway behind the Hyatt Harborside, where she goes for a quiet moment away from the troopers she commands. "Out here, as opposed to having my Barcalounger and my DIRECTV via satellite, it's exhausting and uncomfortable. I feel like I've been kicked to the side of the road."

With increasing numbers of women moving into law enforcement and up in rank, locker rooms are becoming one of the last battlegrounds for equality. While Kathleen M. O'Toole's appointment as Boston's police commissioner was hailed as a breakthrough for women in local law enforcement, some female supervisors in both of the state's largest police forces are fighting for what they say is a more basic right: rooms where they can rest and change clothes without mixing with male counterparts or the women under their command.

Rottenberg has filed a complaint with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, and three female Boston sergeants are suing the department in Suffolk Superior Court over the same issue. The women say their requests are reasonable, since the need for separate changing facilities for the sexes is obvious, and the separation of officers from those they command has long been a basic principle adopted by both military and law enforcement organizations.

"Given how far we've come as a society, the resistance to this is pretty unbelievable," said Shannon Liss-Riordan, a Boston lawyer who represents the four women.

Many large departments -- including Boston, Springfield, and Lowell -- have adopted a three-locker-room policy, with one for women, another for male patrol officers, and a third for male supervisors.

While spokesmen for the Lowell and Springfield departments say that female supervisors there haven't complained about the situation, Mary Jo Harris, lawyer for the Boston police, said yesterday that O'Toole has said that locker room equity is a problem the department is committed to fixing.

Liss-Riordan and the three Boston police plaintiffs, sergeants Debra Gifford, Anne Stuart, and Lieutenant Geniveve King, met with O'Toole Monday, in a meeting the lawyer called "positive," but which did not resolve the issue.

The two sides differ sharply on what the solution should be. While the plaintiffs want four separate locker rooms and say that their research shows that they could be set up for as little as \$52,000, both O'Toole and her predecessor, Paul Evans, have proposed a department wide two-locker-room scheme, one for men and one for women, regardless of rank.

"She is committed to providing equal facilities," Harris said of O'Toole. "It is not a perfect world. We are trying to make the best use of space. To create a room for female supervisors, you are taking space away from another police function."

That possibility alarmed the three female sergeants to the point that they asked a judge to block its implementation by the department, which ultimately agreed to put it off until the litigation was resolved. The last thing they want, the female supervisors said, is to be blamed for the death of the separate rooms for supervisors that their male counterparts have enjoyed for decades.

Rottenberg agrees, saying that is why she will not use the break and locker area, though a spokeswoman for the State Police, Major Marian McGovern, said that male officers have been ordered to change their clothes elsewhere.

The women say they can empathize with their male colleagues because, under the Evans administration, many unutilized and underutilized locker rooms for female supervisors were converted to uses including locker rooms for men, headquarters for a drug control unit, and interview rooms for juveniles and rape victims.

Gifford, for example, said she remembers the day nearly three years ago when she was promoted to sergeant and transferred to the Area E-13 station in Jamaica Plain. She asked a female officer to show her where her locker room was, but when they came to the door she saw that someone had scraped the first two letters off a sign that had read: "Female Superior Officers' Locker Room."

When she talked to the station commander the next day, she said, he told her that the space was needed for the male sergeants and that she could change with the women officers. Gifford, 44, said she was shocked.

"But I wasn't as disappointed about it as I was concerned that I would lose the respect of the officers under my command, if they could get away with doing that to me," Gifford said of her commanders. "I really thought they would have respected the basic fairness issue involved."

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