

## Volunteer Firefighters in Prince George's County Exonerated

*Late Friday night, after a 5-day trial, a jury handed down a verdict of “not guilty” as to all counts and charges against two volunteer Firefighter/EMTs (Emergency Medical Technicians) from the West Lanham Hills Volunteer Fire Department. The verdicts ended a 17-month battle, which stemmed from a December 8, 2015 house fire in Hyattsville, where the two unpaid volunteers were accused of assault by two paid firefighters from a nearby station.*

On December 8, 2015, Engine Company 28 (West Lanham Hills) responded to a working house fire in Hyattsville, Maryland and the all-volunteer crew of five personnel proceeded to extinguish the fire within a few short minutes of arrival. Also on the scene of the incident was a three-person crew of paid firefighters (Prince George's County employees) from a nearby station.

The two female members from that engine company alleged that they were prevented from entering the house and further claimed that the two male volunteers from Engine Company 28 pushed and fought with them while the other volunteers were finishing the extinguishment of the fire. However, these allegations proved to be untrue, said Scott Vazquez, President of the West Lanham Hills Volunteer Fire Department.

The State's Attorney for Prince George's County issued a statement in December of 2016, announcing the charges against the two volunteers: then-Assistant Fire Chief Jeffrey Miller and Firefighter/EMT Christopher Kelly. That statement and other media reports attempted to highlight the fact that the allegations were not only by career (paid) firefighters against volunteer (unpaid) firefighters, but also the male / female aspect of the accusations.

Brian R. Bregman, the attorney for the West Lanham Hills Volunteer Fire Department, which is one of only a small few 100% all-volunteer fire stations in Prince George's County, commented “We feel that the public statements, made by Prince George's State's Attorney Angela Alsobrooks immediately after her office filed the charges in this case, were unfair, premature, and designed for maximum political impact. I will not repeat them because they should not have been made in the first place or before our system of justice was finished.”

President Vazquez also noted that, “Then-County Fire Chief Marc S. Bashoor made public comments after this incident first occurred, insinuating that Company 28 and its volunteers were somehow responsible, which again proved to be wrong after a jury of twelve citizens of this County were finally able to hear all of the evidence.”

Mr. Bregman, who represented Kelly at the 5-day trial in Upper Marlboro, said, “The exoneration of these fine volunteer members is a reminder that accusations should never be reported as fact or certainty. These men never committed any crimes whatsoever. They merely did their jobs and did them well, putting the fire out and protecting lives and property. The complainants eagerly leapt at the chance to ‘cry wolf’ for political, financial, and other ulterior motives. It was further aggravated when the government chose to side with the career personnel in this situation, perhaps because of the male-female undertones that they saw an opportunity to create, and despite an unbelievable amount of evidence showing that these members were innocent—evidence that even included videos and photographs.”

There were other egregious violations of the members' rights, Mr. Bregman said, including their right to a speedy trial because the State's Attorney's Office took nearly a year just to present the charges even when they failed to conduct an investigation. He also reported that the claims and allegations were all but completely

discredited and exposed during the trial.

Prince George's County, Maryland has the largest combination volunteer and career fire department in the United States of America. "It also has the strongest, most experienced, and most dedicated volunteer professionals of any combination department, anywhere," President Vazquez stated.

Mr. Bregman, on behalf of the volunteer station, made the following remarks: "Volunteer public safety workers such as firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics generally expect certain hazards when they serve and protect the public. These men and women are exposed to harsh and dangerous conditions. They have a surprisingly high rate of heart attacks, high blood pressure, and even cancer as compared with other occupations. However, never do they imagine that politics and personal agendas would be allowed to put their freedoms and families at risk. These two gentlemen can now return to their personal lives and full-time careers with some semblance of normalcy. I just hope that, after this ordeal, we have not lost them as 'volunteer professionals' in our community."

At trial, Volunteer Firefighter/EMT Christopher Kelly was represented by Attorney Brian R. Bregman of Laurel, Maryland, and Volunteer Assistant Fire Chief Jeffrey Miller was represented by Ann E. Koshy and Patrick J. McAndrew of Greenbelt, Maryland.

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