

Federal jury awards \$25K to former bank employee

Kathleen Principe argued Seacoast Banking violated family leave rights

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FORT PIERCE — A U.S. District Court jury has awarded a Port St. Lucie woman \$25,000 in her lawsuit claiming her rights under the federal Family Medical Leave Act were violated by Stuart-based Seacoast Banking Corp.

Kathleen M. Principe claimed that on Sept. 26, 2008, she was driving to work at the Seacoast National Bank branch on Westmoreland Boulevard in Port St. Lucie when her daughter called and said she was going to kill herself and her infant son.

Principe's suit states she had to wait two hours before she was given permission to leave work to take care of her daughter and the 8-month-old child.

She also claimed that when she asked for two to three weeks of short-term leave, she was given two days.

Only after she notified bank officials she was exercising her right under the Family Medical Leave Act and threatened to sue unless she was given time off, the lawsuit states, was Principe granted 12 weeks of leave.

When she returned to work Jan. 2, 2009, Principe said, she was not given her previous position as a branch specialist but assigned to a teller job.

Stuart M. Address, the Stuart attorney who represents Principe, said the two jobs paid the same salary but that the teller position offered Principe less opportunity to earn bonuses.

Principe alleged she was singled out and disciplined for issues "that were not raised with other employees who engaged in the same conduct."

Principe was fired Jan. 26, 2009. She filed a complaint against Seacoast Dec.

18, 2009, claiming she was fired in retaliation for exercising her right for time off from work under the Family Medical Leave Act.

The jury ruled that Seacoast interfered with Principe's rights by delaying her leave time and owed her lost wages and benefits for not being assigned to an "equivalent position" after her return.

But jurors said the bank did not fire her in retaliation for taking leave time and awarded no damages to compensate for her termination.

Address said he'll file post-verdict motions to double the award for his client and seek costs of about \$15,000 and attorney fees of about \$225,000 from Seacoast as well as an injunction ordering Seacoast to strictly abide by the Family Leave Medical Act.

Dennis S. Hudson III, Seacoast chairman and CEO, declined to "comment on an ongoing legal matter that we're continuing to work on."

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