

Justice brass to undergo anti-racism training

Department acknowledges need for action

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The Justice Department, confronting public allegations that it drives away visible minorities by denying them promotions and other opportunities, is requiring hundreds of managers nationwide to take anti-racism training.

The "national diversity awareness initiative" is part of a broad effort to change a departmental culture that a former government lawyer described as "toxic" when he testified at a Senate hearing on employment equity in the public service.

Mark Persaud, who came to Canada from Guyana as a refugee in 1983, told the Senate committee last year that he quit the Justice Department in 2003 because he was fed up with the "overt racism and discrimination of employees."

The department, which denied at the time that it had a problem, now acknowledges that it needs to address the fact that employees in the top salary brackets are almost exclusively white.

Justice Canada will begin this spring to hold up to 22 weekend workshops for managers in major Canadian cities and attendance will be mandatory, said Donna Miller, an associate deputy minister.

As many as 660 managers will be required to attend.

"The department has always been committed to diversity," Miller said. "What happened last year I think gave us a boost in how we focused on this."

Persaud, who joined the Justice Department in 1993 after graduating from Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, drew national headlines in February 2008 when he slammed the department's track record.

He told the committee that all the non-white lawyers he knew eventually left Justice because they were tired of being stuck at the bottom of the career ladder. They didn't get the best files, were passed over for promotions and lacked mentors, he said.

Deputy Minister John Sims, in a letter last year to the Ottawa Citizen, refuted Persaud's allegations by writing that the department "does not tolerate discrimination or racism in any form" and offers "a fair and welcoming work environment."

Sims was not available for an interview, but Miller acknowledged that the department recognizes there are too many visible minorities in the bottom pay rungs.

The Lawyers Weekly newspaper reported last year that 88 per cent of visible minority lawyers in the department work in the two lowest salary tiers, compared to 71 per cent of white lawyers. Visible minority lawyers are also absent from upper management.

Senator Don Oliver, a black Nova Scotian, said he has built a sizable file of complaints against the department from the many letters, faxes, e-mails and letters he received after the Senate hearings.

A common theme, he said, is a feeling that promotions "always go to the white people."

Miller said the workshops are part of an overall effort toward a cultural shift in the department. Other measures include mentoring programs for racial minorities and developing programs to identify management material.

"There's no question we're not there. This is a work in progress."