

METRO

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D.C. Ordered to Pay in Police Chase

Woman Maimed in Crash Is Awarded Almost \$1 Million

A jury has ordered the D.C. government to pay nearly \$1 million to a woman who was maimed when her car was struck during a high-speed police chase.

Valentina Chambers was headed home from work Feb. 2, 2003, when she crossed paths with the fleeing car and the pursuing police cruiser near 17th and A streets NE. The suspect's vehicle -- being followed because it had expired tags -- hit her car.

Chambers, 34, lost three fingers and other parts of her left hand as a result of the crash.

D.C. police have one of the strictest pursuit policies in the country, permitting officers to engage in chases only if they believe that a suspect has just committed a violent felony or the pursuit might prevent harm to others. The policy was crafted after seven bystanders were killed in 1991 by police cars or the vehicles they were chasing.

Chambers, of Southwest Washington, sued the city in D.C. Superior Court, claiming that the pursuit was negligently conducted in a residential neighborhood. The jury concluded Tuesday that the District was liable for her injuries, though its award of \$945,118 in damages was far less than the \$100 million sought in the suit.

The officer, Theresa Waterhouse, had been on the force for 11 months. She was on patrol about 5:30 p.m. when she saw the vehicle with an expired tag, according to documents filed in the case. Waterhouse turned on her emergency lights and began pursuing the car east on A Street. The car, driven by Patrick Thomas, did not halt for a stop sign at 15th Street, the suit said.

As the pursuit continued, at 45 to 50 mph, Waterhouse turned on her cruiser's sirens. The crash occurred seconds later, when Thomas's car plowed into Chambers's at 17th Street.

The plaintiff's attorney, Kim Brooks-Rodney of the law firm Cohen & Cohen, argued that the officer's actions violated departmental directives on chases and that the District was liable for the officer's conduct and for Chambers's injuries.

The District denied negligence during the trial, in the courtroom of Judge Geoffrey M. Alprin.

The jury sided with Chambers, finding that the officer was not on an "emergency run" at the time of the accident; that the District, through the officer, was negligent; and that the negligence was a factor in the accident.

In a statement, Brooks-Rodney applauded the jury's decision and called the officer's decision to pursue "inexcusable."

Traci L. Hughes, a spokeswoman for the D.C. attorney general's office, said the city intends to file a motion to set aside the verdict.

Waterhouse left the D.C. police department in February 2005.

By Henri E. Cauvin
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