

Employee Tops City In Lawsuit

Man Acts As Own Lawyer, Gets \$30,000 In Damages

By Barbara Moran

Constitution Staff Writer

Atlanta city attorneys have 10 days to file for reconsideration of the verdict in the federal court case of George Cofield, a former city employee who successfully sued the city for \$30,000 in damages and back pay.

Cofield charged that after he protested three years ago about discriminatory hiring, firing and transfer procedures within the city's Bureau of Correctional Services, his supervisors in the department transferred him from his position as a corrections officer to the job of swineherdsman at the city prison farm.

After deliberating for about four hours Friday, U.S. District Court jurors returned to Judge Newell Edenfield's courtroom with a finding in Cofield's favor. He received \$20,000 in actual damages, \$10,000 in punitive damages and \$500 in attorney's fees.

Cofield represented himself during the week-long trial. He had spent two years preparing to do so. Federal courthouse employees said Monday that he visited the building nearly every day to sit in on other trials, read lawbooks and study lawsuits submitted by attorneys.

"I've been going down to the law library for two years," Cofield said Monday, "learning how to be a lawyer. And now all of a sudden everything is justified. My whole existence has revolved around this case."

Referring to his actions in the courtroom as well as the numerous motions he filed over the last two years, he said, "For two years, I felt like I was nothing. The way the city treated me—all I wanted was justice. And getting justice was all I had to keep me going.

"I'm not gloating. I'm just satisfied that justice was done. I represented myself. And two years ago, I didn't know a complaint from a road map."

Before the trial, Cofield wrote in one motion that he had approached eight "prominent" attorneys who all declined to represent him, adopting a "you-can't-fight-City-Hall attitude."

Cofield alleged in the suit that he was transferred from his job at the city jail to the prison hog farm—which he called "a repulsive and odious place" — purportedly because he was needed there.

But he maintained during the trial that he had no experience with farming, and that he was transferred on August 12, 1976 — one day after he met with then-city Chief Administrative Officer Jule Sugarman to protest arbitrary transfers within the corrections bureau.

His complaints were based on transfers and demotions of certain employees who maintained they had complained publicly about the way the bureau was run.

Cofield also noted during the trial that following his transfer, which made him feel like "a checker" in a game instead of a 'free black American," he was replaced by a federally funded worker in the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act temporary jobs program.

See CITY, Page 3-C

City

Continued From Page 1-C

Following his transfer, Cofield maintained, he could not get transportation to work and was subsequently fired on Jan. 11, 1977, for failing to report. Cofield had several people testify to his dependability and "above-average" performance on the job prior to his transfer.

The city's defense was based on the premises that employees can be transferred wherever needed within the department; that no employee is assured transportation even if transferred; and that Cofield was rightfully dismissed for abandoning his new assignment.

Cofield, a lay minister, said he may use the trial's outcome as a basis to appeal to the National Labor Relations Board to get his job back.