

Woman wins case against officer

Jury says Matteo didn't have enough evidence for an arrest

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WEST HAVEN — In a rare occurrence, a federal jury has found that a decorated veteran police officer misrepresented information on an arrest warrant application and violated a suspect's civil rights by arresting her without enough evidence.

In the case against Officer Louis Matteo, the jury in the U.S. District Court in Waterbury found in favor of plaintiff Bernadette Hansen, on several counts.

Hansen was awarded \$2,500 in

compensatory damages in the case, but no punitive damages.

"This was about credibility," said Hansen's attorney, Glenn Conway of the New Haven firm of Williams, Polan & Patis. "Officer Matteo lied and . . . this proves that private citizens can still have recourse."

But winning a jury trial against a police officer is not easy, according to John Pavia, professor of law at Quinnipiac College and an attorney at the Farmington firm of Levy & Droney.

Among the reasons such verdicts are uncommon is that the

public tends to give police a great amount of deference and the benefit of the doubt, Pavia said.

Many people — and the law — also recognize that police officers have a very difficult job to do, Pavia said.

"In my experience the odds are against you if you are a plaintiff (in a case involving police)," Pavia said. "The chances of recovery are not great."

Hansen was charged by Matteo with larceny in 1996, but the charges were later dropped in Su-

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perior Court.

The jury found that a preponderance of evidence showed that Matteo "acted intentionally or recklessly" in putting untrue information into an arrest warrant application and had no probable cause to arrest Hansen in 1996.

The suit was against Matteo as an individual, and did not involve the Police Department.

Matteo, formerly a detective, and one of the most decorated officers on the West Haven force, received five commendations at a recent awards ceremony.

Matteo, who chose to go back to patrol, is known for his gritty, no-nonsense attitude and ability to uncover criminal activity.

He is credited with developing information that led to some of the most high-profile cases in the re-

cent memory, including a 1993 case in which crack cocaine and uncut heroin with a street value of more than \$500,000 was recovered.

In two previous suits in federal court against Matteo, both resolved in 1988, the jury found Matteo innocent of allegations he used excessive force against suspects.

Conway said Thursday he remains puzzled about the fact that the jury in this case found in favor of Hansen, but did not award punitive damages.

Hansen was charged on a warrant with larceny in 1996, following an investigation into allegations that her company, Cylinder Head Repairs, had removed a truck-trailer from a parking lot in West Haven.

Also in 1996, Hansen settled a civil case against the city alleging the company had unfairly been re-

moved from the city towing list.

Conway said from the beginning the case involving the trailer was a dispute between two businesses and should not have involved an arrest. In addition, information obtained by Matteo that Hansen had ordered the trailer taken was not true, Conway said.

Attempts to reach Matteo Thursday were not successful.

Police Chief Michael J. Kelly said he could not comment on the case, because he has not received any official notification.

Kelly said he will decide whether the department should investigate the case after he learns more details.

Pavia said he does not know specific details of the case against Matteo. But he said in some cases police officers with a high rate of success can be perceived, or portrayed, as having an over-zealous nature.