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Florida attorney general, two fired lawyers in public dispute

By Kathleen Haughney, Sun Sentinel

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Attorney General Pam Bondi and two recently fired employees are embroiled in a public fight over whether her office fired the two lawyers for being too aggressive against mortgage lenders involved in foreclosure fraud cases or whether the lawyers engaged in unprofessional conduct.

A few months ago, Theresa Edwards and June Clarkson were making national headlines for exposing mortgage lenders and law firms for unsavory practices related to the foreclosure mess plaguing the state and country. Then Bondi's office abruptly fired them at the end of May — and the two lawyers cried foul.

"Obviously we did our job too well," Edwards told Orlando Sentinel columnist Scott Maxwell earlier this week. "We were making too much noise."

Bondi refused to explain the firing for a week after the story broke. But Thursday afternoon, after a week of media coverage featuring the two lawyers, she changed her mind.

A lengthy statement released by Bondi's chief of staff Carlos Muniz said that the two women were let go from the agency's Fort Lauderdale office because of problems related to "proper identification and analysis of legal issues ... judgment in discussing matters related to pending investigations with third parties ... and ... professionalism to opposing counsel."

They were given the right to resign rather than be fired, Muniz' statement said, adding that "their performance was unacceptable, but they had not engaged in deliberate misconduct."

But the women's evaluations, turned over by the Attorney General's Office, have been consistently high. Edwards' aggressive demeanor toward opposing counsel were noted in a review last September, but she was also called a "go-to" person. Clarkson also received positive reviews.

Muniz highlighted a document that indicated the division director had several "areas of concern" about their job performance. But that document, provided by the attorney general's office, does not specifically mention Edwards or Clarkson. It only mentions "members of the South Florida staff."



Richard Lawson, the economic crimes division director appointed by Bondi after she took office in January, said that he had no particular reason for not naming the women in the document. He said that he identified several concerns with the two employees on his trips to South Florida last spring and met with them on three different occasions to discuss how he felt they could improve.

"They were very specific and meaningful shortcomings that we just found unacceptable," he said, saying they were listed in Muniz' memo.

Bondi spokeswoman Jenn Meale said that there was no paperwork documenting the meetings, which were just conversations between Lawson and the two employees.

Edwards, in an e-mail, said she disputed the Attorney General's Office version of events and that she and Clarkson had not seen Lawson's evaluation of them. Their yearly evaluations were conducted by their direct supervisor.

She said that she and Clarkson were pleased that the Attorney General's Office was dedicating more attorneys to foreclosure fraud, but said she also found it curious that they would do so without letting the two lawyers provide any transition notes on their cases.

"I will be interested to see the results of all the hours and energy that is now being used on these investigations," she wrote.

Edwards and Clarkson attracted widespread media attention for the exposure of foreclosure mills, turning up fraudulent signatures and fake names on documents being used to oust people from their homes. Documents didn't have the correct dates. Large financial institutions couldn't always produce the proper paperwork.

But as the women were racking up cases, Bondi also came under fire for being soft on mortgage lenders.

Religious leaders came to Tallahassee in May protesting Bondi's decision to oppose a key provision in a 50-state negotiation with the nation's five largest mortgage servicers. Bondi and six other attorneys general disagreed on one point — cutting the mortgage principal for qualified homeowners.

In mid-May, Joe Jacquot, an attorney in Bondi's office, was named senior vice president of Lender Processing Services, a firm under investigation by the office.

According to the Attorney General's Office, Lender Processing Services is still under investigation as well as nine other firms that have been accused of improper mortgage practices. The office also noted Jacquot was a holdover from the administration of former Attorney General Bill McCollum.

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