



For Immediate Release

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Michigan House of Representatives Sued by Former Gamrat-Courser Staffers over Violation of First Amendment Rights, Wrongful Termination

Grand Rapids, Michigan, December 7, 2015 – Keith Allard and Benjamin Graham today sued the Michigan House of Representatives for its role in violating their First Amendment rights, wrongful termination, invasion of privacy and retaliation.

Allard, a resident of Kent County, and Graham, a resident of Genesee County, filed the suit this morning in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Michigan in Grand Rapids. The two are seeking unspecified damages related to their unfair dismissal from their positions on the staffs of Cindy Gamrat and Todd Courser, former representatives who disgraced themselves and their public office through their illegal and unethical behavior.

The complaint, which was filed by H. Rhett Pinsky and Sarah Riley Howard, attorneys with Pinsky, Fayette, Smith & Kennedy LLP, details repeated attempts by Allard and Graham to address the illegal and unethical actions of Gamrat and Courser with Speaker of the House Rep. Kevin Cotter, his Chief of Staff Norm Saari and House Majority Counsel Brock Swartzle months before the allegations became public. To read the full complaint, click [here](#).

Howard is available for media interviews today.

“The Michigan House unfairly and illegally dismissed us from our positions on the staffs of Cindy Gamrat and Todd Courser, former Representatives who disgraced their public office through their illegal and unethical behavior,” Allard and Graham have written in a joint statement. “The actions of the Speaker of the House and his most senior aides have publicly embarrassed us, exposed us to identify theft and forever harmed our personal and professional reputations.

“We took the proper steps to redress this situation by quietly and consistently reporting the illegal and unethical actions of our former supervisors. Speaker Cotter’s staff assured us repeatedly that they would take action and yet did nothing. They attempted to cover up for former representatives Courser and Gamrat by condoning our terminations. Speaker Cotter only initiated an investigation when evidence was published in the media, many months after his senior staff originally learned of these issues.”

The 35-page complaint alleges:

- Despite public assertions to the contrary, Speaker Cotter knew as early as the second week of February of allegations that Courser and Gamrat were misusing public resources and creating a hostile work environment for employees (page 6)
- Details related to the now-infamous “controlled burn” email that Gamrat and Courser tried to pressure Graham into sending (page 9), including Saari’s advice after the fact encouraging Graham to “stick it out” in the short term as they worked to find him another job (page 11)
- The House Business Office terminated Allard and Graham at Courser’s and Gamrat’s direction (page 15) even though Saari and Swartzle knew the terminations constituted unlawful retaliation, and then Republican leadership leaked news of their terminations to the media (page 16)

- The House Business Office reached a “reckless and untrue conclusion” in its Aug. 31 report on Gamrat-Courser that the terminations of Allard and Graham were justified and left out several key facts the Business Office and Speaker Cotter’s staff knew about, which “unfairly harmed their professional reputations” (page 20)
- In releasing a copy of the report on the Internet, the House Business Office posted Allard and Graham’s complete Social Security numbers, as well as other personal irrelevant communications designed solely to embarrass and harm them (page 21)

“According to established protocol, Keith and Ben repeatedly brought their employment-related issues to at least five formal and informal meetings with Norm Saari, then chief of staff of the Speaker of the House,” Howard explained. “Both Keith and Ben tried to remain discreet about the affair and abusive management of Gamrat and Courser, and tried simply to do their jobs focused on serving the taxpayers of those two districts.

“When it became impossible for them to continue to work in the office, they tried to quietly resolve the issues with Republican leadership, who promised repeatedly to help them. Instead, when Courser and Gamrat ordered the House Business Office to fire Keith and Ben in direct retaliation for reporting their illegal and unethical conduct, Cotter’s staff not only acquiesced in the firing, but also denied to the public that they knew about Keith and Ben’s attempts to make things right.”

Allard and Graham concluded by writing: “We saw illegal and unethical conduct and reported it. Instead of taking action, Speaker Cotter and his staff chose to protect Todd Courser and Cindy Gamrat at our expense. We’ve tried everything possible to resolve this, but we’ve been forced to initiate legal action against our former employer to seek justice.”

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