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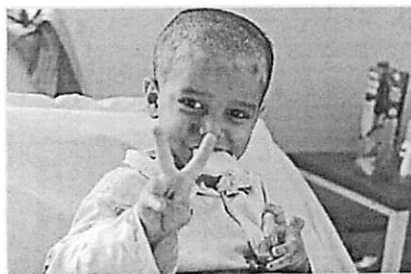


CAPTION

By Associated Press, Published: April 4

ATLANTA — Jurors awarded the former director of Georgia's ethics commission \$700,000 on Friday, ruling in her favor in a lawsuit in which she said her salary was cut and a deputy removed for investigating complaints against Gov. Nathan Deal.

The jury sided with Stacey Kalberman after more than two hours of deliberations, also deciding she would receive attorney's fees and back pay.



"I'm relieved. I've honestly and truly believed what happened to me was wrong," Kalberman said after the verdict. "I'm very thankful that our justice system permits this."

Kalberman claimed in her suit against the commission and its current director that commissioners had slashed her salary and eliminated her deputy's post after the two sought approval to issue subpoenas as part of the agency's investigation into Deal's 2010 campaign reports and financial disclosures.

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The state argued that the personnel actions



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were motivated by budget concerns.

Deal, a Republican bidding for another term, was later cleared of major violations in the ethics probe and agreed to pay \$3,350 in administrative fees. His political opponents seized on Friday's verdict to raise questions about Deal as he seeks re-election this year.

Deal's spokesman Brian Robinson said after the verdict that the ethics commission operates independently of elected officials and that the lawsuit involved "an internal dispute between former employees and former commissioners."

Separately, the attorney general's office declined to comment, citing other pending lawsuits filed by Kalberman's former deputy, Sherilyn Streicker, and a former information technology specialist for the commission.

Kalberman's attorneys argued throughout the trial that the commissioners began moving to push their client out after a May 3, 2011, commission meeting because she had presented them with draft subpoenas in the Deal investigation. Kalberman was told during a meeting just over a month later that her salary would be cut by about a third and her deputy's position eliminated, the jury heard.

In her closing argument, Kalberman attorney Kim Worth argued that her client faced direct retaliation for zealously pursuing an investigation into the complaints against Deal's campaign.


Assistant Attorney General Bryan Webb countered that dire budget problems facing the agency were the motivation behind the personnel actions.

Former commissioners who testified at the trial said they were concerned about the state of the agency's budget after the May 2011 meeting and were taken aback when she asked for a raise for herself and some members of her staff in the executive session that followed it.

Holly LaBerge, who succeeded Kalberman as director of the commission and still holds that post, testified during the trial. She said she was contacted by someone in the governor's office in mid-May 2011 asking if she'd be interested in the commission director job and was later contacted by commissioners. All of that happened before Kalberman had been told about her salary cut and before the job was publicly posted, jurors were told.

After the verdict, members of the jury met Kalberman in the courthouse hallway and hugged her.

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