

# Jury awards \$7 million to former public defender stalked by client, finds King County liable for hostile work environment

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Sheila LaRose is a former King County public defender who was stalked by a former client. LaRose, who suffered extreme PTSD and was medically terminated from her job in... (Ken Lambert / The Seattle Times)More

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By

[Sara Jean Green](#)

*Seattle Times staff reporter*

Sheila LaRose used to see herself as a tough and determined public defender committed to fighting courtroom battles on behalf of her indigent clients, many of whom had long struggled with homelessness, drug addiction and mental health issues.

“I had a zeal for that work and I just loved it. I felt like I had a purpose,” said LaRose, 58, who started out in 2003 as a defense investigator for The Defender Association, now known as the Public Defender Association, before earning her law degree and returning in 2009 as an attorney.

But that all changed eight years ago when a client with a history of stalking women became obsessed with LaRose while she was representing him. He repeatedly called her at work, left women’s underwear on her car, showed up unexpectedly near her workplace and eventually peered into her bedroom window.

The growing terror LaRose endured through most of 2013 and into early 2014 was compounded by the sense of betrayal she says she felt when her supervisors failed to remove her from the case, which ended in his conviction. Even after his release from jail, she says her supervisors did nothing to stop his escalating behavior until he started showing up at her West Seattle home.

LaRose would later learn that another female attorney who also worked for PDA and had once represented the same client had been replaced by a male attorney after the client had made unwanted calls to the female attorney, once repeatedly professing his love for her.

Diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression in 2015, LaRose was medically terminated from her job as a public defender in 2017. She hasn't been able to work since then.

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The same year she was diagnosed with PTSD, LaRose filed a lawsuit against King County, which nearly 1½ years earlier had officially become the employer for attorneys and staff working in the four law offices that provide public-defense representation.

After a legal battle that stretched for nearly six years, a Pierce County Superior Court jury in October awarded LaRose \$7 million in damages for her fear and anxiety, loss of enjoyment of life, anguish, emotional distress, and pain and suffering, along with the loss of her past and future wages and benefits, court records show.

The jury's verdict, which found King County liable for its gender-based hostile work environment, also entitles LaRose to attorneys' fees and costs. Her attorneys seek \$4.9 million for their work on her case, according to court records.

During trial, King County argued it shouldn't be held liable for what happened to LaRose outside of the workplace, at the hands of a non-employee, and insisted the harm she suffered was not foreseeable.

King County is still reviewing the jury's verdict and has not yet decided whether it intends to appeal, Chase Gallagher, a spokesperson for County Executive Dow

Constantine, said in an email. Because the case is ongoing, he declined to comment further.

In court records and throughout the nearly two-month-long civil trial, which was held in Pierce County because King County was the respondent in the case, the man who harassed and stalked LaRose was never referred to by name. Instead, he was called “John Smith” or “Client A” because he wasn’t a party in the lawsuit and to preserve attorney-client privilege, said Mary Ruth Mann, one of three attorneys who represented LaRose.

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The Seattle Times, which published a news story in 2014 about LaRose’s stalker, is not naming the man, now 48, because experts in stalking say that linking his name with LaRose’s, should he see the story, could reignite his obsession with her.

### **Transferred obsession**

LaRose was assigned to represent Client A in October 2012 in a felony case for stalking a young woman who sold him an iPad at Bellevue Square.

The saleswoman was the fourth woman granted a protection order against him and like his previous victims, reported to police that he phoned her dozens of times, followed her and tried to give her unwanted gifts, court records show.

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LaRose’s client pleaded guilty. By then he had transferred his obsession to LaRose.

According to LaRose's lawsuit, the man called LaRose at work 10 to 20 times a day from jail to profess his love for her. The calls continued after he was released in August 2013. He showed up at her office and contacted her in a nearby coffee shop and parking garage.

Then in February 2014, LaRose arrived home to find her mailbox stuffed with literature explaining the procedure for a woman to convert to Islam to marry a Muslim man, according to court records in the felony stalking case. Two days later, she left work and found a bag on her parked car with love notes, thong underwear and a lace negligee inside. When the man suddenly appeared, she ran and called 911.

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Early on Feb. 20, 2014, the man went to LaRose's house three times, knocking on her door and pressing his face to her bedroom window, according to the charges. She called police each time, but he evaded officers.

After the man showed up the second time that morning, LaRose called a male friend to stay with her, both of them arming themselves with baseball bats, according to the charges. Seeing the man asleep on the couch around 4:30 a.m., LaRose's stalker broke a window in a jealous rage, later leaving her voice messages threatening to kill the man, charging papers say.

A few days later, LaRose arranged to meet the man at a downtown Starbucks, where several of her male colleagues were staged to look out for her safety and to call 911 when he arrived, the charges say.

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Arrested on Feb. 26, 2014, he was found guilty of felony stalking with sexual motivation in early 2015 and was sentenced to seven years in prison, court records show.

Released from prison in July 2019, LaRose's stalker was classified as a Level 3 sex offender, considered the most likely to reoffend. In January 2020, he cut off his state Department of Corrections GPS ankle monitor and was later convicted for a second time for failing to register as a sex offender, court records show.

He is currently incarcerated at the Clallam Bay Corrections Center and the earliest he can be released is on Nov. 2, 2022.

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### **How to get help if you're being stalked**

Stalking is a pattern of unwanted behavior that involves monitoring, harassing, repeatedly contacting or following another person and causes a reasonable person to feel frightened, threatened or intimidated. Stalking can often start out as a misdemeanor crime but then

escalate to a felony. While most victims are stalked by a current or former intimate partner, an estimated 25% of female victims and 32% of male victims are stalked by an acquaintance.

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## **No clear precedent**

LaRose's lawsuit, filed in November 2015, alleged a gender-based hostile work environment under the Washington Law Against Discrimination because of the former client's conduct. The issue of a third party or non-employee harasser was one without clear precedent in the state and the lawsuit was twice dismissed on summary judgment.

The state Court of Appeals, however, adopted the federal standard that an employer may be held liable for the harassment of an employee by a non-employee and reversed the dismissals.

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On July 1, 2013, The Defender Association became one of four divisions within the King County Department of Public Defense, and though the county is not responsible for the actions of LaRose's supervisors before then, county officials "were accountable for the knowledge those supervisors had on day one, when King County took over," said Mann, who represented LaRose alongside attorneys James Kyle and Susan Mindenbergs.

In its trial brief, King County noted that one of LaRose's supervisors offered to have her removed from the client's case but LaRose chose to stay on. Her stalker's criminal acts, committed after LaRose's representation of him ended, were unexpected and the

county took all reasonable steps to protect her, the brief says.

The county further argued the acts committed against LaRose “were perpetrated by a non-employee off work premises, and therefore under well-settled law cannot affect the ‘terms and conditions’ of her employment.”

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Mann said LaRose told her supervisor about the inappropriate calls from the client and thought she should be taken off the case, but wasn’t removed and later told him she’d try to finish it.

In her lawsuit, LaRose argued she should have been removed, even if she objected.

Even though LaRose continued representing the client, Mann said a supervisor should have reassigned the case to another attorney. Testimony at trial showed that women who worked as public defenders in the felony division — and receptionists who took defendants’ incoming calls — were sexually harassed by male clients, to the extent they came to expect it, she said.

The culture was such that the women attorneys, including LaRose, were made to feel they had to prove they were tough enough to handle representing felony defendants, said Mann about testimony at trial. LaRose’s firm also lacked a tracking system to flag clients who had previously harassed their attorneys and didn’t offer any training or have procedures to address sexual harassment from clients, she said.

Even after LaRose no longer represented the man, he was still protected as a former client, Mann said. Attorney-client confidentiality barred LaRose from



discussing anything that happened while she served as his lawyer.

“The jury got that this is a serious injury, that employees — particularly women at work — shouldn’t be subjected to harassment and stalking,” Mann said. “It should be a reminder to employers that as soon as they have knowledge or it’s pervasive in the workplace, they have to act to stop it and there are no excuses.”

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## **Inside her house**

In a recent interview at her attorney’s office near the Seattle waterfront, LaRose said she’s certain her stalker had been inside her house because he later mentioned seeing photos of her daughter, who was 10 at the time, in voice messages left on her work line.

LaRose said she was still reeling from the whole experience, including testifying during his trial, even after he was found guilty.

“I knew I needed to get some help but I didn’t want to take the lid off things,” she said. “Once I got into counseling ... I realized I was really in trouble and that I was really damaged.”

After taking a medical leave in 2015, LaRose said she attempted to return to work but found her anxiety and PTSD were triggered just being in the city. She sold her house and moved out of King County in April 2017 and now lives in northwest Washington.

It wasn’t an easy decision to file a lawsuit implicating her former colleagues in the harm she suffered, LaRose said.

During the civil trial, a psychiatrist testified that for LaRose, the conflict between her duty to her client and

her need to protect herself and her daughter made her PTSD more severe, said Mann.

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“It was an untenable conflict she had to live with,” Mann said. “If it had been stopped early, she never would’ve had to testify against the client she was trying to protect.”

Though she hasn’t worked since her medical discharge, LaRose is currently enrolled in a nursing program. She hopes to graduate in the spring.

“PTSD changes how you see the world and how you relate to the world. Sights and sounds you’d never register can be heart-stopping, they can make you feel you can’t leave your house,” LaRose said. “You’re steeped in it and it’s hard to break through. Even in a more mundane way, your world becomes so shrunk in terms of who you’re willing to trust.”

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