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# Former Enfield school board member with autism sues town, board charging discrimination due to her disability



By DAVID OWENS  
HARTFORD COURANT | DEC 04, 2019





Sarah Selvaggi-Hernandez, a former member of Enfield's board of education, is suing the town, the board and its chairman alleging she was discriminated against because of her autism. (Lauren Schneiderman / Hartford Courant)

A former member of Enfield's board of education with autism has sued the town, the school board and its chairman in federal court, alleging she was discriminated against because of her disability.

In the lawsuit, filed Tuesday in U.S. District Court in Hartford, Sarah Selvaggi-Hernandez contends the board did not make reasonable accommodations to her that would have allowed her to serve. In addition to being on the autism spectrum, Selvaggi-Hernandez is hard of hearing and has auditory processing disabilities, according to the lawsuit.

Because of her disabilities, Selvaggi-Hernandez has difficulty hearing and understanding telephone conversations and in-person conversations. She told the board and town officials, according to the lawsuit, that to facilitate communications she needed written materials, needed to see the person or people speaking and needed to take notes.

She said she asked board members to communicate with her between meetings in writing, such as by email or text message, and to have an erasable white board for note-taking.

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The board agreed to the accommodations, she alleges, but failed to follow through, in violation of the law.

In her lawsuit, Selvaggi-Hernandez seeks the board's compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, lawyers' fees and compensatory damages.

Selvaggi-Hernandez, 40, was elected to the board in 2017 and left it Nov. 12, when her term expired.

During her two years on the board, Selvaggi-Hernandez alleges, board members tried to speak with her rather than write emails or text messages. She says in the lawsuit she was not able to process the verbal communications and said in some cases they left her in physical pain due to sensory dysregulation. She further alleges that board members would not provide her with written information for executive sessions.

She also alleges that fellow Democrat Tim Neville refused to have anything but in-person or phone conversations.

In March 2019, Selvaggi-Hernandez claims in the suit, she met with board Chairman Walter Kruzel and Superintendent of Schools Chris Drezek to discuss communication accommodations and both agreed to provide written documents for executive sessions. She alleges that Neville, who is no longer on the school board, chastised her at a March meeting of the board's Democratic caucus and told her she was not entitled to written communication.

"Mr. Neville's verbal attack upon Ms. Selvaggi-Hernandez caused her severe physical, mental and emotional distress," the lawsuit reads.

Selvaggi-Hernandez also alleges that the board's lawyer, Christine Chinni, told her at a June meeting that the board would no longer accommodate her communication needs, and that Chinni told board members to only speak to Selvaggi-Hernandez in public and to not share any privileged information with her.

Chinni on Wednesday declined to comment on the lawsuit.

Selvaggi-Hernandez claims in the lawsuit that she thought she'd been removed from the board, left the meeting and had a panic attack on the way home. There were no board meetings in July or August, according to the lawsuit, and Selvaggi-Hernandez said she skipped the September meeting "because of the strong

likelihood that the meeting would result in further physical, mental, and emotional distress related to her disabilities.”

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She claims the board's conduct toward her has forced her to miss work, be hospitalized and increase therapy, according to the suit.

“I ran for election to bring the diverse voices of people with disabilities to the table,” Selvaggi-Hernandez said in a prepared statement. “I was deeply hurt by the way the board treated me and it caused me tremendous pain and emotional distress.”

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Selvaggi-Hernandez works as an assistant professor of occupational therapy at Bay Path University in Longmeadow, Massachusetts.

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