

*The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*

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## EEOC OBTAINS \$1 MILLION FOR LOW-WAGE WORKERS WHO WERE SEXUALLY HARASSED AT FOOD PROCESSING PLANT

BALTIMORE -- The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) today announced a \$1 million settlement of a class action lawsuit against Grace Culinary Systems, Inc. and Townsend Culinary, Inc. alleging egregious sexual harassment of 22 Hispanic women at a food processing plant in Laurel, Maryland. The suit charged the companies with routinely subjecting the female workers, all recent immigrants from Central America who spoke limited English, to unwanted groping and explicit requests for sexual favors by male managers and co-workers over several years.

"This case sends a clear message that wholesale violations of the civil rights of the most vulnerable workforce -- immigrant women in low-wage jobs -- will not be tolerated," said EEOC Chairwoman Ida L. Castro. "It is regrettable that harassment, abuse, and exploitation of a sexual nature still occur in the 21st Century workplace. The EEOC will remain vigilant to ensure that no worker endures this type of discrimination in order to earn a paycheck and support their family."

Under the terms of the settlement, approved by the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland (Southern Division), Grace Culinary Systems, Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of W.R. Grace & Co., will pay \$850,000 to the victims. Townsend Culinary, Inc. and its parent company, Townsends, Inc., will pay \$150,000. The plant was operated by Grace until March 1996 when it was sold to Townsend, who operated the facility until it closed in April 2000.

The sexual harassment was widespread with managers routinely subjecting women to groping and crude and explicit requests for sexual favors over a period of years. The harassers were managers and male co-workers. One woman was locked in a freezer by her supervisor after she turned down his sexual request. Two other women who were pregnant at the time were pressured for sex and subsequently demoted and fired following their refusal to comply with the advances. Other women at the plant were given menial or difficult work assignments for rejecting requests for sexual favors by plant managers.

EEOC General Counsel C. Gregory Stewart said, "Whether it's sexual harassment or other forms of discrimination, the Commission will protect the rights of low-wage workers in the immigrant community, who are among the most vulnerable segments of today's workforce. This group of workers, who represent an increasing percentage of the labor market, are often unaware of their legal rights and afraid of being fired or even deported for speaking out against discrimination on the job."

Gerald S. Kiel, Regional Attorney of the EEOC's Baltimore District Office, who was responsible for prosecuting the case, remarked: "Sexual harassment was pervasive and widespread at this plant because the employers failed to implement policies or procedures that had any reasonable likelihood of preventing such discriminatory conduct. But thanks to the courage of the victims and the critical assistance of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local 400, the EEOC was able to make

sure that justice was done."

Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In addition to enforcing Title VII, which prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, the EEOC enforces the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, which protects workers 40 and older; the Equal Pay Act; the Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibits discrimination against qualified individuals with disabilities in the private sector and state and local governments; prohibitions against discrimination affecting persons with disabilities in the federal government; and sections of the Civil Rights Act of 1991. Further information about the Commission is available on the agency's web site at [www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov).

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