

Disgraced bureaucrat getting \$400,000 in severance

BY AMY MINSKY, POSTMEDIA NEWSMARCH 4, 2011

OTTAWA — The federal government is paying \$400,000 in severance to Christiane Ouimet, the disgraced former public-sector integrity commissioner who resigned in haste last fall, Postmedia News has learned.

The sum is based on a calculation of a year-and-a-half of Ouimet's salary and benefits.

She also qualifies for her pension.

The severance pay is documented in a file the Privy Council Office sent to members of a House of Commons committee who requested communications between the office and Ouimet for their study of the former commissioner's performance and departure.

The Privy Council — the public service agency which serves the Prime Minister's Office and cabinet — asked that the committee keep confidential the document detailing the severance.

Ouimet was appointed commissioner in April 2007 and tasked with protecting government whistleblowers seeking to disclose wrongdoing in the federal public sector.

She abruptly quit her post in October 2010, four years before the scheduled end of her term, while Auditor General Sheila Fraser was investigating the office.

Fraser's disparaging report slammed Ouimet for failing to properly do her job and found the office — which has an \$11-million budget — investigated only five of 228 complaints filed during Ouimet's three-and-a-half-year tenure.

Ouimet also berated, intimidated and yelled and swore at her staff, the report said.

Following the criticism and backlash the report caused, the public accounts committee asked Ouimet to testify and to explain her actions.

Letter-writing, phoning and knocking on doors went unanswered for months before a lawyer for Ouimet, Ivan Whitehall, contacted the chair of the committee, Liberal MP Joe Volpe.

Other communications were released during the committee meeting Thursday.

In those, there is a thread of emails between Mario Dion — appointed by the Conservatives as interim commissioner in the wake of Ouimet's departure — and Patricia Hassard, who works at the Privy Council Office.

In one, Dion alerted Hassard to the fact that a former senior official in the Office had hired a lawyer "in order to pursue a claim for constructive dismissal," or for being fired without cause.

Ouimet is expected to testify before the committee next week.

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