



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Inez Austin - Actions for Justice

## Description

A summary of Inez Austin's response to her poor treatment.

## Body

As a result of the harassment she received following her June 1990 refusal to certify the proposed pumping procedure, Austin filed a formal complaint with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) on October 11, 1990. She claimed that she was verbally harassed, threatened with dismissal, given a written reprimand and ordered to undergo psychological evaluation. Less than two months later, Austin, who had been represented by attorney Tom Carpenter of the [Government Accountability Project \(GAP\)](#), agreed to drop the complaint in return for a number of concessions. She was to receive a new job, a month off with pay, attorney fees, and the right to remove several derogatory items from her file, including a letter of reprimand. And on August 1, 1991, John C. Layton, the DOE's Inspector General, released the [results of an investigation](#) he made following the accusations of Austin and others at Hanford: that Hanford security personnel illegally acquired and used equipment for wiretapping, eavesdropping and other surveillance activities.

But Austin's problems were only beginning. When the harassment continued on, she kept fighting against it. She reported various incidents at various times to individuals within the company, but received little in the way of responses. This was during the period when Austin was being given very few assignments, and she documented this phenomenon in detail along with other forms of harassment. She told of the break-ins of her office, the tampering of her computer, the exclusion from meetings, and many other things. All of her efforts were proving fruitless, so

she needed to change tactics. Austin decided to take her grievances to the top.

Up to that point, it seemed that the higher Austin went with her complaints, the less of a reaction she got. So she went as high as she possibly could -- to Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary. They met on April 17, 1996, and O'Leary promised Austin that her termination would be put on hold and her paychecks would continue. But that never happened. Austin then filed a complaint with the Department of Labor (DOL) and won, but the settlement she was offered did not come close to making up for her lost wages and benefits, not to mention her damaged reputation and other legal violations committed by Westinghouse Hanford and the DOE. Austin sent an angry letter to O'Leary on December 9, 1996, documenting the inadequacy of the settlement and her intention to pursue legal action.

## **Rights**

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## **Resource Type**

Case Study / Scenario

## **Topics**

Whistleblowing

Employer/Employee Relationships

Community Relations

Public Well-being

Environmental Justice

## **Discipline(s)**

Nuclear Engineering

Engineering