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Cook jury awards \$1.8M in hotel sex assault

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A Cook County jury awarded \$1.8 million to a Texas woman who said she was raped while unconscious by a security guard at a Skokie hotel.

The jury returned a verdict on Feb. 24 after a three-week trial before Cook County Circuit Court Associate Judge Robert Senechalle Jr., compensating Karla Gress for her past loss of a normal life and emotional distress.

Gress, then 49, of the Dallas area, stayed at the Holiday Inn & Suites Chicago North Shore in Skokie on a work trip in 2013. Gress worked as a medical transcription software trainer at the time. The hotel is owned by Lakhani Hospitality, Inc.

On Oct. 2, 2013, Gress visited the Bar Louie inside the Holiday Inn premises. When she returned to her room later that evening, Gress called the front desk for help with her air conditioning. Hotel employee and security guard Alhagie Singhateh was sent to Gress' room to investigate the issue.

According to the complaint, evidence shows Singhateh went back up to Gress' room on numerous occasions throughout the evening. During one of the visits, Gress alleges, Singhateh sexually assaulted her while on duty.

Gress filed a lawsuit against the hotel in 2015 claiming it breached the duty of care to protect guests against unreasonable risk of harm and was negligent in several ways.

The case was reinstated in 2018 following an appeal after a dismissal order in 2017.

Gress claimed the hotel failed to maintain appropriate policies and procedures for the safety of its guests and failed to enact policies and procedures that dictated employee interaction with intoxicated guests.

Singhateh was terminated in 2010 due to poor work performance, including failure to fill out a complete security report for every shift, the complaint stated. He was rehired into a "Security Supervisor" position in 2013.

Gress contended that

Lakhani improperly rehired Singhateh despite knowledge of criminal actions and behavior outside of his job description.

These behaviors included a history of physical aggression, a prior arrest, a complaint by a female guest regarding both her safety and the safety of other guests, and a complaint by a male guest that Singhateh had been following women to their rooms, making them uncomfortable, according to the complaint.

Gress also argued that Lakhani failed to properly terminate Singhateh prior to her 2013 assault, and failed to provide appropriate training and supervision to Singhateh.

Gress was represented by Tara R. Devine and Jaclyn J. Kurth of Salvi, Schostok & Pritchard, as well as Brian Monico and John Chwartzynski Jr. of Hale & Monico.

"There is a special duty between a hotel, as an innkeeper, and the guests that they have on their premises," Devine said. "And so I think the jury really recognized that there is a higher degree of care

that needs to be applied by hotels for the safety and security of their guests."

Devine added that she was grateful that her client was able to get her day in court after years of litigation.

"This verdict represents an important step in the healing process, justifies Karla's case and sends a strong reminder to hotels and their staff that it is imperative that policies are in place to protect guests from harm on their watch," Monico said.

Lakhani was represented by Margaret Firnstein and Michael Schlechtweg of SmithAmundsen LLC. "Lakhani Hospitality, Inc. and we, as the defense attorneys, are disappointed in the jury's verdict. Our client's policies and procedures were consistent with custom and industry practice, and the evidence introduced at trial supported a finding that the events alleged were wholly unforeseeable to the organization," Firnstein said.

The case is *Karla Gress, et al. v. Lakhani Hospitality Inc., et al.*, No. 18 L 7330.