



MIKAYLA WHEATMORE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Desiree Wood, a trucker and president and founder of Real Women in Trucking, a nonprofit organization. Her group has joined a legal complaint against Stevens Transport.

Women blocked out of trucking

Lawsuit claims that policies requiring same-sex training are used to exclude them

BY PETER EAVIS

The trucking industry has complained for years that there is a dire shortage of workers willing to drive big rigs. But some women say many trucking companies have made it effectively impossible for them to get those jobs.

Trucking companies often refuse to hire women if the businesses do not have women available to train them. And because fewer than 5 percent of truck drivers in the United States are women, there are few female trainers to go around.

The same-sex training policies are common across the industry, truckers and legal experts say, even though a federal judge ruled in 2014 that it was unlawful for a trucking company to require that female job candidates be paired only with female trainers.

Ashli Streeter of Killeen, Texas, said she had borrowed \$7,000 to attend a truck driving school and earn her commercial driving license in hopes of landing a job that would pay more than the warehouse work she had done. But she said Stevens Transport, a Dallas-based company, had told her that she couldn't be hired because the business had no women to train her. Other trucking companies turned her down for the same reason.

"I got licensed, and I clearly could drive," Ms. Streeter said. "It was disheartening."

Ms. Streeter and two other women filed a complaint against Stevens Transport with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission last week, contending that the company's same-sex training policy unfairly denied them driving jobs. The commission investigates allegations made against employers, and, if it determines a violation has occurred, may bring its own lawsuit. The commission brought the lawsuit that resulted in the 2014 federal court decision against similar policies at another trucking company, Prime.

Critics of the industry said the persistence of same-sex training nearly a decade after that ruling, which was not seen as a national legal precedent, was evidence that trucking companies had not done enough to hire women who could help solve their labor troubles.

"It's frustrating to see that we have not evolved at all," said Desiree Wood, a trucker who is the president and founder of Real Women in Trucking, a nonprofit organization.

Ms. Wood's group is joining the three women in their E.E.O.C. complaint against Stevens, which was filed by Peter Romer-Friedman, a labor lawyer in Washington, and the National Women's Law Center.

Companies that insist on using women to train female applicants generally do so because they want to avoid claims of sexual harassment. Trainers typically spend weeks alone with trainees on the road, and the two often have to sleep in the same cab.

Critics of same-sex training acknowledge that sexual harassment is a problem, but say trucking companies should address it with better vetting and anti-harassment programs. Employers could reduce the risk of harassment by paying for trainees to sleep in hotel rooms, which some companies already do.

Women made up 4.8 percent of the 1.37 million truck drivers in the United States in 2021, according to the most recent government statistics, up from 4 percent a decade earlier.

Long-haul truck driving can be a de-



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Ashli Streeter borrowed \$7,000 to attend truck driving school. She got her license, but despite there being a shortage of big-rig drivers, she has been turned down for several jobs. Top, Ms. Streeter, far right, at home with her parents and children in Killeen, Texas.

manding job. Drivers are away from home for days. Yet some women say they are attracted to it because it can pay around \$50,000 a year, with experienced drivers making a lot more. Truck driving generally pays more than many other jobs that don't require a college degree, including those in retail stores, warehouses or child care centers.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 required the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration to set up an advisory board to support women pursuing trucking careers and identify practices that keep women out of the profession.

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Robin Hutcheson, the administrator of the agency, said requiring same-sex training would appear to be a barrier to entry. "If that is happening, that would be something that we would want to take a look at," she said in an interview.

Ms. Streeter, a mother of three, said she had applied to Stevens because it hired people straight out of trucking school. She told Stevens representatives that she was willing to be trained by a man, but to no avail.

Bruce Dean, general counsel at Stevens, denied the allegations in the suit. "The fundamental premise in the charge — that Stevens Transport Inc.

only allows women trainers to train women trainees — is false," he said in a statement, adding that the company "has had a cross-gender training program, where both men and women trainers train female trainees, for decades."

Some legal experts said that although same-sex training had been ruled unlawful in only one federal court, trucking companies would struggle to defend such policies before other judges. Under federal employment discrimination law, employers can seek special legal exemptions to treat women differently from men, but courts have granted them very rarely.

Ms. Streeter said she had made meager earnings from infrequent truck driving gigs while hoping to get a position at Stevens. Later this month, she will become a driver in the trucking fleet of a large retailer.

Kim Howard, one of the other women who filed the E.E.O.C. complaint against Stevens, said she had been attracted to truck driving by the prospect of a steady wage after working for decades as an actor in New York.

"It was very much a blow," she said of being rejected because of the training policy. "I honestly don't know how I financially made it through."

Ms. Howard, who now works at a different company, said she once worked at a company where she was trained by two men who treated her well. "It's quite possible for a woman to be trained by a man, and a man to be a professional about what the job is," she said.

Other female drivers said they had been mistreated by male trainers who could be relentlessly dismissive and sometimes refused to teach them important skills, like reversing a truck with a large trailer attached.

Rowan Kannard, a truck driver from Wisconsin who is not involved in the complaint against Stevens, said a male trainer had spent little time training her on a run to California in 2019.

At a truck stop where she felt unsafe, Ms. Kannard said, the trainer demanded that she leave the cab — and then locked her out. She asked to stop the training and was flown back to Wisconsin. Yet she said she did not believe that same-sex training for women was necessary. "Some of these men that are training, they should probably go through a course."

Ms. Wood, of Real Women in Trucking, said trucking companies' training policies were misguided for another reason — there is no guarantee that a woman will treat another woman better than a male trainer. She said a female trainer had once hurled racist abuse at her and told her to drive dangerously.

"I'm Mexican — she hated Mexicans and wanted to tell me all about it the whole time I was on the truck," Ms. Wood said.

"She screamed at me to speed in zones where it was not safe."

Still, some women support same-sex training policies. Ellen Voie, who founded the nonprofit Women in Trucking, said truck driving should be treated differently from other professions because trainers and trainees spent so much time together in close quarters.

"I do not know of any other mode of transportation that confines men and women in an area that has sleeping quarters," Ms. Voie said.

Lawyers for Prime, the company that lost the E.E.O.C. suit in 2014 challenging its same-sex training policy, called Ms. Voie as an expert witness to defend the practice. In her testimony, she contended that women who were passed over by companies that didn't have female trainers available could have found work at other trucking companies. She still believes that.

But Ms. Voie added that trucking companies also needed to do more to improve training for women, including placing cameras in cabs to monitor bad behavior and paying for hotel rooms so trainers and trainees can sleep separately.

Ben Casselman contributed reporting.