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Public Safety

## Jury awards \$260,000 to Md. towing company owner denied business because of his ethnicity



Mamoud Ashkar at his towing business in Riverdale Park. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

By **Lynh Bui** June 15 at 1:33 PM [Email the author](#)

Greg's Towing had been snatching up cars for the Riverdale Park police department for nearly 30 years, and when Mamoun "Mike" Ashkar bought the company in 2014, he planned to maintain that tradition.

Town procurement rules favored locally owned businesses and Greg's Towing was the only towing company in Riverdale Park. But what Ashkar thought would be a straightforward business transaction degenerated and morphed into a discrimination case. With allegations that town officials called him a "camel jockey" and

“foreigner” who couldn’t pass a background check, Ashkar sued, saying he found himself shut out from doing business because of his ethnicity.

After a four-day trial and two hours of deliberation, a Prince George’s County jury last month agreed, finding Riverdale Park must pay Ashkar \$260,000 in damages for denying him business based on his Middle Eastern background.

“I was just shocked and just felt mistreated,” Ashkar said of why he brought the lawsuit.

“It was a four-year battle of being harassed and antagonized and talked about. It was a very rough time,” he said.

Ashkar was born at Prince George’s County Hospital Center after his parents migrated from the Palestinian territories in 1975.



Ashkar with his attorney Levi Zaslow. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

“They didn’t want to start a family in a place that was at war,” Ashkar said.

Ashkar went to local schools in Prince George’s County and Virginia before getting into the towing and recovery business with his brother.

Riverdale Park adjoins Hyattsville and University Park and has approximately 7,300 residents, according to 2017 U.S. Census estimates.

When the owner of Greg’s Towing announced plans to retire, the business was sold to the highest bidder at the time, a company called Alley Cat Towing and Recovery. In light of the planned sale, Riverdale Park started to use Alley Cat towing.

But soon after, Alley Cat backed out of the deal. Ashkar and his brother decided to step in and buy Greg’s Towing.

“At the time, Mr. Ashkar was aware that in the past all Town towing business ran through the Greg’s Towing’s lot and that the Town had passed a resolution establishing a local purchasing preference policy,” the lawsuit asserts. “Indeed, when Mr. Ashkar had previously inquired with the Town office, at least twice, regarding their towing needs, he was informed that only Greg Prenable or the person operating the Greg’s Towing lot would be eligible to receive Town business because it was the only lot within Town limits.”

Ashkar took over the company in January 2015 and immediately tried to rebuild the company’s relationship with the town. But when he went back to town officials to reestablish the business, he got brushed off on several occasions and “never got a straight answer,” the lawsuit claimed.

On July 16, 2014, Ashkar went to the police station to set up a time to discuss the towing business with officials and he said he overheard the assistant police chief telling others in the office that “somebody needs to tell that camel jockey he isn’t towing for Riverdale.”

Ashkar said that afterward, top officials in the police department continued to call him a “camel jockey” and “foreigner.”

At trial, Ashkar testified to hearing the slurs, his attorney, Levi Zaslow, said.

“He was horrified and shocked that this is happening right here in our own backyard in the 21st century,” Zaslow said.

City officials also falsely claimed he had a criminal record to dissuade other police departments from doing business with him, although Ashkar had no criminal record, his lawsuit asserted. City officials also wrongly claimed he had failed to pass background checks when none had been conducted and disparaged his employees as criminals to stifle his business, the lawsuit stated.

The police chief and deputy chief did not respond to requests for an interview about the case sent to them and to the town manager.

Riverdale Park Town Manager John N. Lestitian replied in a statement that the town respects the judicial process but plans to file a motion asking a judge to reconsider the jury’s decision because “the Town does not believe the verdict is supported by the law.”

“The Town disagrees with the assertion that discrimination was at play in selecting to do business with a firm other than the plaintiff’s company,” Lestitian said. “Riverdale Park is a diverse and welcoming community and the Town has and will continue to celebrate both diversity and inclusivity.”

Lestitian said he couldn’t comment on the town’s post-trial court actions specifically because the matter remains in litigation.

But Zaslow and Ashkar say they’re convinced that the bad treatment was not a coincidence.

“In court, the town asserted that it was their business decision to select an alternative towing company since Greg’s Towing was temporarily removed from a list of county-approved vendors as ownership was transitioning to Ashkar,” Zaslow said. “We were able to systematically show that each purported business decision was actually a pretext.”

Ashkar said growing up in the area, his family might get some strange looks when he’s out with his wife who wears a hijab. But, he said, he has never experienced the overt racism he overheard in the police station or endured in the past four years dealing with Riverdale Park officials.

Ashkar said he filed the lawsuit to send the message that unfair treatment and undoing someone's livelihood because of their ethnicity is unacceptable.

"It's a shame we had to take these actions to show what's happening but sometimes that is what it takes for people to open their eyes to see what's going on," Ashkar said. "We encourage others to use our business and to see we're not criminals and we can pass background checks."

Ashkar said his company tows vehicles for Maryland State Police, the federal government and Prince George's County. Ashkar said he hopes to work things out with Riverdale Park to resume the towing business in the town, where there still is not a contract defining who can tow vehicles for the municipality.

Ashkar said his family is no different than others in Prince George's County. He's a business owner and his family members have been "Redskins fans since we were born." They go to football games, hit the beach, take family outings to Six Flags and plan for their children's educations.

"My parents moved here because it's supposed to be the land of the free," Ashkar said. "It's made up of a lot of people. We all live together and this is what makes this country up, people from all over. . . . It's a very normal life and I don't know why they would think otherwise."