When a female firefighter sued the City of Dubuque and its fire chief in late 2020, it was front-page news.

Our sources alerted us to the filing, and we reported on the allegations she made of sexual harassment, discrimination and retaliation. But our efforts to get beyond the court documents were stymied. The parties involved in the suit declined to talk freely, while others in the department remained tight-lipped about conditions, particularly for the few female employees.

We tracked the suit over the next 15 months until it, somewhat surprisingly, went to trial. Our newspaper covered the opening and closing statements, occasionally checked on the proceedings and reported on the verdict, but even when the jury awarded the firefighter $575,000 in damages, it was clear that there was more to this story.

Our newsroom made a commitment to dig in. We paid the court reporter to work up transcripts of the key witnesses – spending almost $1,000 on that alone. Reporter Kayli Reese dug into those 276 pages of testimony and 58 exhibits also submitted as part of the trial. She secured a key, in-depth interview with the firefighter who sued, we were finally able to get a few other members of the department to speak, and we were able to use that information to get city officials on the record because they now felt compelled to explain.

We devoted extra space in a Sunday edition to lay it all out for readers – a fire department that was a toxic and hostile environment for women. It was a story that was not told anywhere else before or even after we printed ours.

Two days later, our executive editor highlighted our efforts in her weekly column, explaining to readers how we went about tackling the piece and how our coverage helped bring the situation to light.

One week after Kayli’s story ran, our Editorial Board – which does not include Kayli – called on the City of Dubuque to take concrete, transparent steps to change the culture in the fire department and police department, which also previously had a somewhat similar lawsuit.

The timing was right, as the longtime fire chief had just retired – though he insisted the lawsuit and its fallout had nothing to do with his timeline. City officials already had advertised the position and were just starting to wade through the large pool of applicants.

In subsequent discussions, we heard city leaders in public meetings reference our reporting, voice disappointment over the conditions in the fire department and express a desire for change.

On April 29 – one month and two days after Kayli’s major story printed – we printed an exclusive story about the city manager recommending the hire of the city’s first female fire chief.

Council members approved the hire days later, and during her first week on the job, the new fire chief agreed to sit down with the newspaper to talk about how she intended to go about addressing that culture and reshaping the department.