

News

How common is sexual harassment in state government -- and which agencies have had the most complaints?

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How common is sexual harassment in state government — and is it more prevalent in some agencies than in others?

Those questions are difficult to answer. But through a public records request to the state Human Resources Division, The Republican/MassLive compiled a list of 117 complaints made to executive branch state agencies alleging sexual harassment, or in a few cases gender discrimination, from fiscal 2016 through fiscal 2018. A small number of these cases may be duplicates.

The numbers were drawn from quarterly spreadsheets of Health and Human Services investigations and quarterly workforce diversity reports from other agencies.

The Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination provided a list of another 45 complaints of public sector sexual harassment or sex discrimination. Some involve state executive branch agencies, but that list also includes complaints against municipalities, higher education institutions, county sheriffs, the trial court and other public agencies.

At the end of fiscal 2018, there were 84,100 state government employees, including 44,500 in the executive branch.

The human resources data documents approximately 94 complaints at the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, the state's largest agency. Of those, the Department of Developmental Services — which cares for adults with disabilities

According to the Office of Health and Human Services, all employees undergo mandatory harassment and diversity training run by the Human Resources Department. The agency runs in-person trainings on respect, civility, fair employment practices and harassment.

“The Executive Office of Health and Human Services does not tolerate any form of harassment in the workplace and strives to ensure that our 23,000 employees feel safe and supported while at work,” said Health and Human Services spokeswoman Brooke Karanovich. “Each complaint of harassment is immediately and thoroughly investigated in collaboration with the state’s Human Resources Division.”

The other complaints were scattered across agencies, with nine at the Department of Transportation, five at the Department of Correction, and three at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Experts say agencies should not necessarily be judged negatively based on how many complaints they report, since it may mean they are better at tracking complaints.

“I think that every place has its challenges, and the differences we’re seeing are differences in sophistication of data being reported,” said Lauren Rikleen, president of the Rikleen Institute for Strategic Leadership and author of “The Shield of Silence: How Power Perpetuates a Culture of Harassment and Bullying in the Workplace.”

MCAD spokesman H Harrison said that agency has seen a spike in complaints since the #MeToo movement called public attention to workplace harassment of women. “As news coverage was really focused on #MeToo movement, a lot of people were more emboldened to speak out against it. There was a sense people can seek justice and get justice from coming forward,” Harrison said.

Boston-based employment lawyer Rebecca Pontikes, who specializes in gender-based employment cases, said the number of cases brought does not indicate the prevalence of sexual harassment. She said some women may be hesitant to report because there is no witness to corroborate their case, or they do not believe their superiors will care.

“A lot of women either a, don’t report, b, leave their jobs and may or may not report, or c, may report and it’s resolved, and it never gets to MCAD or court. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen,” she said.



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