

Report on Research Compliance Volume 16, Number 6. May 22, 2019 Amid Apologies From NIH, Sexual Harassment Working Group Vows Steps to 'Change Culture'

By Theresa Defino

During an emotional, 90-minute listening session, women who have been sexually harassed and their supporters told their stories to regretful and remorseful NIH leaders, explaining how the agency has failed them and urging accountability on the part of NIH-funded institutions.

"There are many pillars propping up the culture of permissiveness in which this behavior flourishes, and NIH is one of them," Esther Choo, M.D., an Oregon emergency medicine physician and co-founder of the Time's Up Healthcare movement, said via video chat. (For more information, see <https://www.timesuphealthcare.org>.)

"I have been affected negatively by sexual harassment or sexual misconduct for the entirety of my postgraduate career," added Angela Rasmussen, Ph.D., beginning with a sexual assault during graduate school. During a May 16 listening session at the agency headquarters, Rasmussen described how she later worked with Michael Katze, who was fired by the University of Washington in 2017 following a finding of sexual harassment and inappropriate relationships going back more than a decade. "The university kept a large portion of his grant money," she said. "The bigger priority was not worrying so much about the people harmed by him, but about making sure that the university could retain those indirect costs."

Now a research scientist at the Center for Infection and Immunity at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, Rasmussen's experiences are not confined to NIH-associated officials or faculty. Just a year ago, a program officer at a different federal agency cancelled a \$2 million contract for research involving primates after she rejected his advances. The individual was fired and the money was restored only after the prime institution intervened and threatened to sue, she said.

"This, to me, is all exemplary of the fact that this is an ongoing struggle, and it's a struggle [involving] individual institutions, departments, investigators, and funding agencies [that] have failed to hold people accountable," said Rasmussen. "At this level we need to stop having as many conversations that are intended strictly to educate, but need to start having conversations about how to meaningfully change policy to hold abusers, the institutions that enable them and the funding agencies that continue to fund them accountable for this sort of damaging behavior." (For more information on Katze, see <http://bit.ly/2Who6vj>.)

Another woman described how a faculty member who was party to a settlement following his sexual harassment of her was promoted and won new NIH funding.

The listening session was held to give an NIH working group direct input from women as the members work to prepare interim recommendations to the NIH Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD) at its meeting later this month. Final working group recommendations are expected to the ACD later in the year.

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