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NIH Elaborates on Agency, Institutional Roles When Handling Sexual Harassment Concerns

By Theresa Defino

NIH's plans to manage and maybe one day help rid the medical research field of sexual and other forms of harassment have moved forward slowly, punctuated by apologies and some pronouncements (no more "manels" for Director Francis Collins, a reference to all-male speaking panels). The agency is currently awaiting final recommendations from a high-ranking task force, due in December.

In the meantime, among the clearest statements about the agency's expectations when it comes to awardees may be found in a perhaps little-noticed Q&A in the form of a podcast. Last month NIH posted a recorded conversation between David Kosub, a health policy analyst with the Office of Extramural Research, and Jodi Black, OER deputy director.

In May, NIH held a "listening session" at agency headquarters to hear from victims of sexual harassment and their supporters, prior to the presentation to the Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD) of draft recommendations by a special working group ("Amid Apologies From NIH, Sexual Harassment Working Group Vows Steps to 'Change Culture,'" RRC 16, no. 6).

Collins was met with criticism for the creation of the working group when it was announced in December ("While Some Say 'Time to Act,' NIH Forms Working Group on Harassment," RRC 16, no. 1).

Earlier in the spring, Collins reported that, in 2018, 14 principal investigators were "replaced," 21 PIs were fired or faced other disciplinary actions by their institutions, and 14 individuals were "removed...from peer review."

In addition, "NIH conducted administrative inquiries into 35 allegations of a sexual nature by NIH staff (both federal employees and government contractors)," Collins said. "While some of these incidents remain under review, formal disciplinary actions ranging from reprimand to termination of employment were taken against 10 staff members, and informal disciplinary actions, including counseling/training and cease-and-desist warnings, were taken against another 10 staff members."

At the same time, Collins and other top agency officials said they "are concerned that NIH has been part of the problem. We are determined to become part of the solution" ("In This Month's E-News," RRC 16, no. 4).

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