

## Report on Research Compliance Volume 18, Number 8. July 22, 2021 As NIH Strives to Reduce Sexual Harassment, Many Details Remain Hidden, Institutions Balk

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By Theresa Defino

NIH is continuing to face pushback and questionable actions by institutions grappling with agency-funded “superstar” principal investigators (PIs) who sexually harass their colleagues or students. In “quite a number of cases,” institutions have imposed a variety of sanctions without removing the PI from an award, something to which NIH objects, according to Michael Lauer, NIH’s deputy director for extramural research.

Then there are those institutions that sign nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) with PIs and transfer relevant awards to the PI’s unsuspecting new employer, a situation Lauer said NIH is helpless to stop.

Indeed, more than 40% of PIs who were the subject of sexual harassment complaints to NIH were not formally investigated by their employers, and only 25% of allegations were substantiated. Institutions removed from awards only 54 of 215 PIs who were the subject of the complaints, NIH’s data from 2018 through April of this year shows.<sup>[1]</sup>

As a result of the #MeToo movement and recommendations from its own advisory committee, NIH in recent years has vowed to root out harassment in science, with increased transparency and reporting of cases key among the strategies it has embraced.

But even NIH has limits to what it reveals and, in the wake of the pandemic, doesn’t yet have data to know whether its efforts are helping to reduce the incidences of harassment, which may have been artificially suppressed as research shut down or moved off campus. Alternatively, reporting also may be increasing because of attention to the issue, Lauer suggested.

Lauer presented some data on 315 sexual and other harassment cases NIH has handled from 2018 through the end of April during a recent meeting of the Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD).<sup>[2]</sup> At the same meeting in June, Lauer disclosed that NIH is drafting proposed regulations that could mandate disclosures and training, among other items.<sup>[3]</sup>

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