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Universities Urged to 'Do More' to Combat Harassment at Remote Sites

By Theresa Defino

When Angela Olinto, dean of the Physical Sciences Division at the University of Chicago (UC), heard about a report cataloging what one member of Congress termed a “rampant culture of sexual harassment and assault in the remote research environment of Antarctica,” a program overseen by the National Science Foundation (NSF), she queried UC researchers to share their experiences.

“Unfortunately, they were not surprised by the report findings,” said Olinto, who was among those testifying before the Science and Technology Committee during its last full hearing in the 117th Congress, “Building a Safer Antarctic Research Environment.”^[1] It was also the last chaired by Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Texas, who retired after 30 years in the House; she also served on the science committee throughout her entire tenure.

In her written testimony, Olinto said UC personnel reported that the “remote sites and very small number of women throughout the Antarctic continent made it particularly difficult for women in general” and spoke of a “culture where reports of harassment were not taken seriously,” as was detailed in NSF’s report, *Sexual Assault/Harassment Prevention and Response*.^[2]

Olinto noted that UC “and many other institutions have led observatories at the pole to significantly advance the fields of cosmology and astrophysics. Today, our researchers operate the powerful South Pole telescope with its third-generation camera and are part of the impressive IceCube Neutrino Observatory.”

“We agree with the recommendations [for NSF] to improve communications, increase engagement, enhance education and training, strengthen reporting infrastructure and accountability, provide support to victims and probe more deeply into policies and mechanisms aimed at prevention,” as outlined in the report, Olinto testified.

But “universities and research teams also need to do more,” she said.

Researchers Fear a ‘Blacklist’

Johnson, chair the past four years, called the December hearing the most important with which to end her time there. Noting she has been “passionate about breaking down barriers for women,” Johnson said that “left unaddressed, hostile cultures keep women and marginalized individuals from achieving their full potential and hinder our progress.”^[3]

While the continent itself provides “extreme conditions,” the “challenges facing scientists in Antarctica are not merely those imposed by the elements,” Johnson said. NSF, with support from other agencies, “has the responsibility of managing all U.S. Antarctic activities,” she said.

Johnson termed the findings in the August report “sobering,” noting they included “harrowing stories of individuals enduring threats to their physical safety, gender taunts and intimidation. Community members do not trust the agency or contractor to keep them safe from these harms. Multiple people spoke of their fear of

being retaliated against for reporting an assault. Survivors and advocates on ice fear they will be placed on a blacklist. Meanwhile, high-ranking perpetrators” aren’t penalized.

Added Johnson: “We must not tolerate any culture that enables pervasive harassment and assault. While the Antarctic program presents unique challenges, such challenges must not be used as an excuse for an inadequate response and corrective actions.”

She acknowledged the need to “protect employee privacy” but said NSF “must have the necessary information to keep people safe and to keep offenders off the ice.” The report contained no details on the number or types of incidents occurring at NSF’s research sites in Antarctica. Science committee members pressed NSF officials for numbers, which agency representatives said they could provide. However, none were disclosed during the hearing.

The only hint of the scope of harassments or assaults among NSF awardees was disclosed in the NSF Office of Inspector General (OIG) work plan for fiscal year (FY) 2023, which stated that from FY 2019 through FY 2021, NSF had received 43 notifications of findings or determinations of sexual and other forms of harassment or sexual assault. OIG is conducting an inspection of Antarctic research sites to look into the issue.^[4]

The report found “a rampant culture of sexual harassment and assault,” Rep. Frank Lucas, R-Texas, now the chair, said at the hearing. “As I have said before, sexual harassment and gender discrimination are unacceptable in any situation, period. It’s wrong, it’s illegal, and it’s imperative that we end it.”

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