

# Women say New York agency let sex harassment go on for years

By DAVID KLEPPER March 1, 2019

GLENS FALLS, N.Y. (AP) — One woman says a male co-worker at her state job grabbed her head and forced it between his legs. Another woman says the same man exposed his penis to her while she worked in her cubicle. A third says the man pulled her into a small room, unzipped his pants and said, “Why don’t we just get this over with?”

All three told The Associated Press that no one did anything significant about their complaints against Chad Dominie for at least two years, until one of the women said he grabbed her by the arms and threatened to sexually assault her in October 2017. That accusation prompted a call to police and a harassment charge against Dominie, an administrative assistant in a small office of a New York state agency that helps the disabled.

Dominie has acknowledged engaging in “locker room” behavior — “I tell her to ‘shut her whore mouth’ and I’m the big villain?” he said — but denied exposing himself or threatening or touching anyone inappropriately. He has been suspended from his job without pay since his arrest, pleaded guilty to a harassment violation — less than a misdemeanor — and paid \$120 in court costs. To date, he remains a state employee, pending the outcome of a disciplinary proceeding.

“This has to stop,” said Mary Tromblee, the woman who accused Dominie of threatening sexual assault and in the previous nine months complained that he twice lifted her skirt, reached down her blouse to grope her breast and exposed himself by her desk.

“Not one person protected me,” said Tromblee, who took out a restraining order against Dominie and has now filed a federal harassment complaint. “I want people to know — you can stand up for yourself.”

Though leaders such as Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo insist New York has a tough law on sexual harassment, with more changes proposed this legislative session, the allegations that roiled this office of less than two dozen in Glens Falls underscore a familiar criticism: Aggressive policies aren’t of much use if managers don’t take action.

Harassment is not a new problem in New York state government, nor is it for this particular agency, the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities. The agency’s No. 2 official, Jay Kiyonaga, was fired last year after an investigation revealed “reprehensible” and “sexually inappropriate” acts by him that went back years.

Dominie, 44, acknowledged in an interview with the AP that he engaged in “locker room” behavior that included calling female co-workers “whores,” providing marijuana to supervisors and viewing pornography in the office.

He contended that he was only punished after he threatened to report the improper behavior of supervisors, and that his conduct and language were long tolerated as part of the office “culture.”

“I was never offended by it,” he said. “I’m an old Marine. It was a joke. We were just horseplaying.”

Dominie, a 21-year veteran of the state agency who made \$41,000 a year before his suspension, says the allegations of harassment prompted his wife to divorce him, and he expects to be fired later this year. To make ends meet, he’s been working as a youth sports referee.

Two supervisors, one of whom has since retired, declined to comment to the AP. But the agency issued a statement defending its handling of the situation.

“Upon learning of the allegations, OPWDD immediately reported the incident to law enforcement and the accused employee was placed on administrative leave,” it said. The statement added that unnamed employees involved in the matter were “appropriately disciplined” and counseled, though it declined to offer details.

The women interviewed by the AP tell a much different story.

They said the two supervisors witnessed the behavior and didn’t properly handle multiple complaints, some of which date to at least 2015. Instead of reporting them for further investigation, the women said, the supervisors would repeatedly call Dominie in for meetings with his accusers and ask him to “do better.” The women said he would reform for a few days, only to go back to his old ways.

One woman recalled how Dominie not only used explicit language but also assigned letter grades — A, B, C, D or F — to female co-workers based on their outfits and appearance on any given day. The woman said he showed a particular interest in feet, forcing her to swear off open-toed shoes.

“It got to a point where I stopped caring what I look like. I stopped doing my makeup, doing my hair. I gained a lot of weight,” one of the women recalled. “I would wake up every day thinking ‘what can I do to stop him from bothering me today?’”

AP generally does not identify those who say they were sexually assaulted or harassed. Of the three women AP interviewed about Dominie, it is identifying only Tromblee, a 53-year-old registered nurse, because she said she wanted to tell her story publicly.

The two other women gave accounts that were consistent with the formal complaints Tromblee lodged with the state and with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Tromblee and another woman who spoke about Dominie still work in the office; a third has retired.

Tromblee recounted how one supervisor, a woman named Alexis Barlow, asked her whether she had provoked the harassment by flirting with Dominie. Tromblee said in her EEOC complaint that another supervisor, a man named Liam Stander, sometimes exchanged pornography with Dominie over their smartphones and simulated sexual intercourse with him through their clothes as employees watched.

Standar has since retired. He and Barlow declined to comment for this story.

In response to the story, a group of former legislative staffers who say they were harassed by lawmakers called for additional legislative hearings on harassment. The group, Harassment Free

Albany, was a driving factor in the Legislature's decision to hold a hearing on harassment last month — the first hearing dedicated to the topic in three decades.

“Why were devoted public servants like Mary left to defend themselves- not just against their harasser but their supervisors who are enabling victim-blamers?” the group tweeted. “We deserve better. We expect more.”

Caitlin Girouard, a spokeswoman for Cuomo, called the allegations raised by the women “absolutely despicable and 100 percent unacceptable” and said the governor has worked to improve laws prohibiting harassment in both the public and private sectors.

“We fully expect the disciplinary processes to result in appropriate penalties against anyone who has violated the law.”