

HELPLINE TO HEALING

THE NEW #METOOPA INITIATIVE PROVIDES A HOTLINE AND A SAFE SPACE FOR SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT AND HARASSMENT TO GET NEEDED LEGAL AND COUNSELING ADVICE. BY CHRISTIANA DILLARD. ILLUSTRATION BY HANNA BARCZYK



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hen Anna-Lena Kempen, an employee of Pittsburgh's Mattress Factory museum, brought forward her concerns to management about a former coworker sexually harassing her and other employees last year, she did it for her peace of mind.

"I had been in conversation with a lot of women who either were or had been working at the Mattress Factory," she said. "So, as all of these conversations were happening for months and months and months about our experiences and our feelings and our frustrations and what we wanted to do or what we could do, eventually I said, 'Listen, I'm going to go forward.'"

Much to Ms. Kempen's shock and disappointment, the accused employee did not receive the severe discipline she believed was required based on the complaints she and her colleagues made. The accusers also alleged that top staffers at the museum retaliated against those who had complained. That is when the women decided to file a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board, and the case eventually became a major news story locally and nationally.

Although Ms. Kempen recognizes that the case resulted in a few positive changes at the museum, including an internal investigation, she knows that everyone who experiences sexual harassment may not have taken the same course of action.

"Sharing stories is just one form of emotional support," she said. Through the help she received from legal counsel, she learned that even if she had chosen not to come forward on the job, there are more options for receiving assistance.

One of the avenues sexual harassment and assault survivors in the Pittsburgh region now have available is #MeTooPA, an initiative started by the Women's Law Project in collaboration with FISA Foundation's program to end domestic and sexual violence, Southwest PA Says

No More. Launched in January, #MeTooPA's purpose is to assist Pennsylvania students and low-wage workers with legal advice regarding sexual harassment and assault. Funded by The Heinz Endowments and supported by several partnering organizations, the program allows participants to ask questions confidentially and receive answers from legal and counseling professionals.

Creators of the initiative closely studied how the national #MeToo movement addressed sexual harassment and assault to determine the best methods of tackling this multifaceted issue. Of particular interest was TIME'S UP, an organization that started after #MeToo and established a celebrity-supported legal defense fund for sexual assault survivors.

"They raised the money to hire attorneys just to be on call for victims of sexual harassment and assault," said Kristy Trautmann, executive director of FISA Foundation and founder of Southwest PA Says No More. "So we were talking about ways that we could do something like TIME'S UP here."

Participating organizations created the #MeTooPA hotline to provide a convenient means for survivors to talk about their needs, especially their legal concerns. Individuals can access the hotline on weekdays by calling 412-281-2892 during regular business hours, and an attorney is available to consult with callers free of charge.

"I think this helpline is really about having somebody safe and on your side, a confidential expert to help you really think through where behaviors have crossed the line and what your options are for taking action," said Ms. Trautmann. "And that may for some people include taking some sort of legal action, but that can also be just about having somebody who is safe and supportive to talk to."

Sue Frietsche, senior staff attorney at the Women's Law Project, explained that one kind of advice does not fit all, and the Endowments' contribution leaves room for #MeTooPA to address its clients' individual concerns.

"What The Heinz Endowments grant does for us—which is so welcome and so overdue and so wonderful—is it is giving us the capacity to reach out and inform people at the point at which they need us," she said. "They do have rights and there are resources to help them."

Carmen Anderson, director of Equity and Social Justice for the Endowments, believes that #MeTooPA comes just in time for this urgent problem.

"We've known that it's an issue, but until now victims—primarily women and girls—had limited options as to where to turn. Now they have access to easily accessible free information and referrals as well as legal advice and



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representation if necessary,” Ms. Anderson said. “This work should also help destigmatize being a survivor and change the conversation about victimization.”

Other partner organizations have endorsed the efforts of #MeTooPA, realizing its capacity to assist the most vulnerable. For example, students in both the K–12 school system and collegiate institutions are a primary focus. Dr. Kathi Elliott, CEO of the nonprofit Gwen’s Girls, recognizes the potential for #MeTooPA to give young survivors a safe space to explore their options.

“What we want to address is the awareness of what’s acceptable and not acceptable when it comes to relationships and behaviors,” she said. “We want to provide guidance regarding when something is reported, what an adult should do, or what someone who has a friend who’s been impacted can do to help.”

India Renae Hunter, a University of Pittsburgh graduate student in public health and social work, found that her experience with the school’s Title IX program made her weary of seeking sexual harassment and assault assistance through the institution. After being groped at a party the summer before her senior undergraduate year and reporting the incident to several of the school’s sexual assault assistance organizations, her case led to a Title IX hearing that she contends did not proceed with her well-being in mind.

“It was the stereotypical sexist comments and bias by the panel of staff and faculty who were supposed to be prioritizing my safety,” she said. “Like, ‘How much were

you drinking? Are you sure you weren’t drunk? Are you sure you didn’t overreact?’”

The man she accused of groping her was not disciplined for sexual assault, but for physical assault, and Ms. Hunter never received the official written apology he was supposed to send. Though he did reach out to her on his own accord much later, how the case ended greatly affected her experience as an undergraduate student.

“It was still very traumatizing, especially after the fact, because they dragged out the whole process of having the hearing just to give him a slap on the wrist—and I still had to see him at kickbacks and parties and he would literally smile and wave at me,” she recalled. “It would just make my skin crawl.”

Uncertainty about the effectiveness of reporting to school officials also is an issue among younger students. Pittsburgh CAPA senior Auja Diggs, a student activist and youth representative for #MeTooPA, has spoken with peers whose negative experiences with sexual discrimination in areas such as dress codes and sexual harassment have lessened their willingness to speak out. The change she wants to see begins with youth who advocate and support each other.

“Usually when people look at us, they want to baby us. They think we’re not ready; it’s always a power play,” she said. “So, [I decided] why not be a leader myself?”

Similarly, workers are often put in the position of having to vouch for themselves, and can have negative experiences when expressing their trauma. Until her case

with the Mattress Factory, Ms. Kempen was unaware of the ways in which speaking out would affect her personal and professional life.

“There are going to be consequences for coming forward. And nobody wants to hear this, but you’re going to lose friends. Your work relationships are going to be weird. It’s going to reverberate in ways you don’t anticipate,” she said. “And I’m not saying that to dissuade people from coming forward. I just realized that I had to accept that.”

An additional layer of complexity arises when individuals who identify themselves based on a combination of racial, ethnic, gender or sexual minority characteristics come forward with sexual harassment and assault complaints. Their situations often can involve discriminatory treatment on multiple levels. #MeTooPA aims to work with clients of various backgrounds to assist them with their needs.

“When we talk about sexual violence and sexual assault, it does become a women’s issue. But women aren’t the only people who go through this,” said Ms. Hunter. “I think that’s also something that could be talked about, something that should be prioritized: the understanding that anybody can be a victim.”

Ms. Frietsche is especially interested in assisting members of the LGBTQ community who are not sure how to navigate sexual harassment and assault.

“Sexual harassment often occurs in combination with harassment based on other characteristics. It’s kind of intersectional harassment,” she said. “So now more than ever, especially since we do not have statewide protection or national protection for the LGBTQ community, [those individuals need] expert legal advice when they’re facing sexual harassment or harassment based on their sexuality or gender identity.”

The potential of #MeTooPA does not rest exclusively with the work of its legal counseling and hotline. Fighting against sexual harassment and assault is an effort that requires time, energy and resources from many community members to have an effective impact. Though the initiative is in its early stages, there is hope that it can trigger a response just as meaningful as any movement on the national level.

“Having some sort of infrastructure in place that can support people or answer questions or just be someplace that people can call is really important, especially because a lot of times . . . you second-guess yourself and you kind of gaslight yourself as it’s happening. You sit there thinking, ‘Everything else around me seems normal. Am I crazy?’” said Ms. Kempen.

“So it’s very helpful just having somebody or some organization to kind of reality check you and say, ‘No, you’re not crazy. This is a problem, this is an issue.’” **h**



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