

Groups Call for Investigation Into 'Culture of Sexual Harassment' in Albany

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The National Organization for Women and Common Cause New York rallied today to call for a broader investigation into the "culture of sexual harassment in Albany."

The groups outlined a list of expectations for the Joint Commission on Public Ethics investigation into the Assembly's handling of the Assemblyman Vito Lopez sexual harassment scandal.

"JCOPE has an opportunity to prove itself by conducting a real investigation which reveals how pervasive the problem is, whether other instances of sexual harassment were properly addressed as well as bringing forth the full facts of who knew what and when they knew it. A hurried report which fails to address the full scope of the Assembly, and Mr. Lopez's, wrongdoing is unacceptable," said Susan Lerner, executive director of Common Cause New York, in a statement.

It's unclear at the moment how far JCOPE's investigation will go into the sexual harassment scandal, but a spokesman for the commission [told the Wall Street Journal that the probe would be thorough.](#)

"As with any investigation undertaken by the Joint Commission, the evidence is followed wherever it may lead," spokesman John Milgrim said.

Good government groups want an investigation into how Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver handled the settlement with Lopez's accusers, but confidentiality rules prevent JCOPE from detailing whom they are investigating.

Silver said yesterday that he had not been interviewed for the investigation. The speaker [faced a lawsuit for tolerating a culture of sexual harassment](#) in the Assembly in 2004 after one of his aides was accused of rape.

Here are the "expectations" NOW and Common Cause/NY have for JCOPE's investigation:

The investigation should be broad in scope in order to determine the duration and extent of Mr. Lopez's actions and the Assembly's responses to any extended course of misconduct. Sexual harassment is rarely an isolated incident, and this holds true in the case of Mr. Lopez where two sets of victims have already come forward with credible claims. News reports have suggested that Mr. Lopez has long operated with impunity and the public deserves accurate information addressing concerns that there may have been additional instances of misconduct, and if so, how they were addressed by the Assembly.

The investigation should be specific, covering in detail any and all acts perpetrated. The language of sexual harassment is too often vague and fails to paint an accurate picture of the abuse. Assembly Speaker Silver's letter of censure was quite detailed; this should be the model for JCOPE.

JCOPE should issue a report that clearly identifies who knew what, when they knew it and what they did about it. Due to the secretive manner in which the Assembly conducted itself, the public requires a full airing of the facts.

Assembly Speaker Silver, and Assembly Staff (past and present), must be held responsible for their role as appropriate under the Assembly's established policies on sexual harassment and ethics and the law. There must be recourse, which demonstrates that there are not two sets of rules: one of the powerful and well connected, and one for everyone else. Sexual harassment is a systemic problem, which must be pro-actively addressed by all employers and by the justice system. Cultural apathy is what creates the environment that allows sexual harassment to exist. It is unacceptable for political interests to be prioritized over the economic needs and safety of female employees.

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