

Silver Looks to Beat Back Critics With New Proposals

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Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, facing escalating calls for his resignation over the handling of the Vito Lopez sexual harassment scandal, wasted no time today in organizing a cohesive response to beat back criticism.

"Mistakes were made; I deeply regret them," Silver said.

Assembly Democrats met in conference with Silver for a good portion of the day and a little after 4:30 p.m. emerged to unveil a three-pronged strategy to better handle sexual harassment complaints.

Silver said that his office will no longer handle complaints but instead create an independent body called The Assembly Task Force on Sexual Harassment that will have its own budget to take complaints and investigate them.

Secondly, all elected Assemblymembers and senior staff will be considered "mandatory reporters" of sexual harassment.

Silver said those who fail to report incidents will face "immediate sanction."

The third measure will come in the form of legislation that will ban confidential settlements at all levels of state government.

Silver was criticized for secretly paying \$103,000 to Lopez's initial accusers. While the settlement was worked out, Lopez was allowed to hire new female staffers who later brought more claims of sexual harassment against him.

"The actions I am announcing today are designed to make sure going forward this never happens again," Silver said. "The mistakes we made were ones of judgment and not borne out of any desire to shield Vito Lopez. What is clear is that we all have a responsibility to make sure we create a safe and respectful workplace. Requiring mandatory reporting is a significant step in realizing this goal."

But Silver's critics say the speaker is simply protecting his leadership.

"I thought I was in a time warp for a second," Republican Sen. Steve McLaughlin tweeted. "Sounds like the same stuff Silver said when Boxley was hauled out in cuffs. Déjà vu."

Michael Boxley was a top Silver aide who was accused of rape by a young legislative staffer. Silver heard the women's story but put out a statement supporting Boxley. The Assembly's ethics commission investigated but did not make a finding. Two years later Boxley was hauled away in handcuffs for the rape of another female staffer. Boxley plead guilty to sexual misconduct.

Assemblyman Michael Kearns left the Democratic conference earlier in the day in protest of Silver's handling of the Lopez matter.

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