

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

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Opening Statement Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings

Hearing on "Examining Misconduct and Mismanagement at the National Park Service" September 22, 2016

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this important hearing. No employee in the federal civil service should ever feel afraid to come to work. And no employee should ever fear retaliation if she steps forward to report misconduct that makes her feel afraid.

I thank Kelly Martin, the Chief of Fire and Aviation Management at Yosemite National Park, and Brian Healy, the Fisheries Program Manager at the Grand Canyon, for being here today.

I thank them for their courage and willingness to come forward and share with this Committee their experiences over decades of work for the federal government.

It should not have been necessary for them to testify today.

A Task Force convened 16 years ago commissioned a study to examine women in law enforcement occupations in the Park Service. Here is what that study found:

Some individuals in positions of authority appear to condone, either by their action or inaction, sexual harassment and discrimination. The system used for handling complaints is not trusted by the employees, nor timely in its ability to bring resolution to complaints. Employees fear retaliation if complaints are voiced.

That was 16 years ago. The Task Force concluded: "it is critical for the NPS [National Park Service] to show a sense of urgency in ensuring that all employees are working in an environment free from unlawful harassment."

The Task Force developed a Five-Year Action Plan with nearly 30 recommendations to correct deficiencies with handling complaints, recruitment and retention efforts, and sexual harassment prevention. However, by the Park Service's own admission, few of these recommendations were ever implemented. The Task Force report was filed away and ignored.

Sixteen years later, the Inspector General has issued a report finding "evidence of a long-term pattern of sexual harassment and hostile work environment in the GRCA [Grand Canyon] River District."

Sixteen years later, the Inspector General has issued a report finding “a pattern of harassment” involving a law enforcement supervisor at the Canaveral National Seashore.

And sixteen years later, allegations have been made at Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks about possible harassment, hostile work environments, and even sexual exploitation.

Today’s hearing will enable us to hear from the Park Service the specific measures it has implemented to ensure that all employees work in facilities where sexual harassment is not tolerated and the agency’s culture welcomes and supports a workforce that reflects the diversity of our nation.

I want to hear about the specific reforms the Park Service has implemented to ensure that all complaints are handled in a fair, timely, thorough, and consistent manner.

I want to hear about the reforms that have been implemented to ensure that the disciplinary process yields consistent and fair discipline across all Park Service facilities and cannot be abused to retaliate against employees who file complaints.

And I want to hear about the reforms that have been implemented to bring the Park Service’s Equal Employment Opportunity program into compliance with the standards of a model program.

In Ms. Martin’s prepared testimony, she wrote: “with steadfast resolve to work together and confront the serious and subtle misconduct issues we currently face, we will set a north star for culture change for the next generation of National Park Service Employees.”

With the commitment of employees like Ms. Martin and Mr. Healy, I am confident that we are on the right course to correct long-standing patterns of harassment and retaliation in the Park Service.

However, to make the changes that clearly need to be made, we have to hold the Park Service’s feet to the fire. It has been 99 days since our last hearing. Our Committee should continue to hold hearings on the Park Service every 99 days until all employees feel safe coming to work and reporting misconduct whenever and wherever it occurs.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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