



**New York County District Attorney's Office**

**Written Testimony by Supervising Attorney for the Sex Crimes Unit Vanessa Puzio for  
New York City Board of Correction Special Hearing on Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment in  
New York City Correctional Facilities**

**April 23, 2019**

Good Morning Chairman Cephas and Members of the Board. My name is Vanessa Puzio. I am a Supervising Attorney in the Sex Crimes Unit and Attorney-in-Charge of Work-Related Sexual Violence Initiatives. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about DA Vance's strategies to combat sexual violence in the workplace, specifically within New York City Correctional Facilities.

Recently, our office received a letter from an anonymous group of female corrections officers. The letter detailed sexual harassment and sexual abuse within the Department of Corrections. Specifically, the letter detailed sexual misconduct committed by supervisors against the female staff. It was anonymous, but the writer made it clear that she and other female officers needed help.

After reading the letter, I reached out to the Corrections Officer Benevolent Association Union and was subsequently invited to Manhattan Detention Complex to give a training on sex crimes in the workplace. The overwhelming majority of officers I spoke to that day stated that inmates routinely groped and touched both male and female officers. The sentiment amongst the corrections officers I spoke to at Manhattan Detention Complex was that being touched in a sexual way had become "part of the job" and reporting it was "not worth it." I urged the officers to report to law enforcement and spoke to them about potential sex offender registration.

Clearly there are significant challenges for corrections officers that are not necessarily reflected in the number of sexual assault cases that are reported by or against corrections officer at the Manhattan Detention Complex. For example, in 2018, there were 597 post-arrest sex crimes cases handled by our office and, out of those, 0 were from Manhattan Detention Complex. In 2017, we again had 0 sex crimes cases originating out of MDC. Not one was a sexual assault committed against a corrections officer. There is also a dearth of complaints that come to our office concerning sexual assaults where inmates are the victim and the perpetrator is also an inmate. As stated in your audit, these case are occurring and being reported to in-house investigators, but they are not making their way to our office. Why is that?

Under the current system, when an individual reports a sexual assault, the case is investigated by your trained in-house investigators. As seen in the NYC Department of Corrections Audit Report, these investigations are not being done in a thorough manner. The cases are then forwarded to DOI, but if the initial investigation was not done properly, the victim in that case is never given an opportunity to have law enforcement appropriately investigate his or her case.

The current system at Correction is reminiscent of the now reformed systems at colleges and universities where victims' complaints were dealt with in-house and where victims of sexual assault were not given options on reporting directly to law enforcement. Victims of a sex crime should not only be given access to medical care as mandated in your rules, but information and swift access to law enforcement, and not simply an in-house investigator.

Sexual violence is a devastating crime that leaves a lasting impact on the survivor. This impact can be acutely felt when the sexual abuse is suffered at the workplace. The Manhattan District Attorney's Office is committed to investigating and prosecuting these crimes and to achieve justice.

In the wake of #MeToo our office saw not only a spike in reporting but countless media reports detailing sexual abuse at the workplace. In an effort to encourage further reporting and engage survivors, the Manhattan DA created the first-of-its-kind Work-Related Sexual Violence Unit. The Unit recognizes the inherent power imbalance and fear of reprisal that survivors face in reporting. But when an act of work-related sexual misconduct constitutes a crime, it is not enough that the abuser loses his or her job. Justice demands and survivors deserve that criminal abusers be held accountable in court.

DA Vance asked me to lead the work-related sexual violence initiatives with our main goal being to encourage further reporting of crimes. As a prosecutor, I continue to work directly with victims of workplace violence but I also go out into the community to speak about our office and encourage reporting. We contact businesses and organizations directly and ask them to circulate our materials to their members and employees. We also offer trainings to employees to let them know who we are and what our office can do to help in terms of referrals to the NYC Commission on Human Rights or in-house counseling. We consider this to be a more holistic approach when dealing with work-related sexual violence.

Our hotline number is 212- 335-9373. When I spoke at the Manhattan Detention Complex, I stressed that we are not just a faceless telephone number at a government agency. We are there to answer questions and provide support for victims of sexual violence.

I would suggest that, going forward, our office further collaborate to assist officers at Manhattan Detention Complex with training and information so that they can make informed decisions about reporting acts of sexual misconduct to law enforcement and to follow through with their complaints to see real change. Furthermore, anyone reporting a crime within a correctional facility should be given the information and resources to have their case investigated directly by law enforcement and not be left to the discretion of in-house investigators.

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