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National Park Service survey finds widespread harassment

After survey finds 1 in 10 employees report sexual harassment, agency promises action.

Lyndsey Gilpin | NEWS | Oct. 13, 2017

Nearly 40 percent of National Park Service employees experienced some form of harassment over a 12-month period, according to long-awaited survey results released by the agency.

The survey assessed sexual harassment, hostile work environment and gender discrimination in the nation's parks, monuments and recreation areas. About 19 percent of respondents reported gender-based harassment; 10 percent said they encountered sexual harassment; and .95 percent said they experienced sexual assault. Some employees reported harassment based on their race, age or disability as well. About 50 percent of the Park Service's permanent employees responded to the survey; a second survey, aimed at seasonal employees, is still in the works.

[RELATED:<http://www.hcn.org/issues/48.21/how-the-park-service-is-failing-women>]

On Oct. 13, Secretary of Interior Ryan Zinke, Park Service acting director Mike Reynolds and Grand Canyon National Park superintendent Christine Lehnertz discussed the results with Park Service employees in Grand Canyon National Park. In January 2016, the Interior Department's Office of Inspector General found systemic sexual harassment among employees working in the River District of the park. A *High Country News* investigation (<http://www.hcn.org/issues/48.21/how-the-park-service-is-failing-women>) showed that widespread sexual harassment, abuse and discrimination were occurring in parks across the nation, including Yosemite and Yellowstone.

“The survey makes it clear that NPS has a significant problem with harassment; it has infiltrated our organization and needs to stop now,” Reynolds said in a meeting with employees. “To all of the employees here in the canyon and in the field affected by harassment, on behalf of the leadership of NPS, I want to apologize and commit to you with everything available that we will better support you.”

Employees have said (<http://www.hcn.org/issues/49.15/social-justice-slow-progress-on-park-service-harassment>) for months that the Park Service has been slow to take action in response to multiple Inspector General reports in 2016 that found systemic sexual harassment and gender discrimination in parks across the country. Reynolds said the Park Service has created a new reference manual for employees, started to revamped its training programs with the help of outside teams of academics and social scientists, and modeled some of its response after the military’s sexual assault program. He also said the agency plans to add more employee resource groups, as well as hold trainings to help bystanders intervene and to “facilitate difficult conversations.”



Secretary Ryan Zinke speaks with park rangers in Glacier National Park in March.

U.S. Department of the Interior

One of the biggest hurdles to addressing harassment is bottlenecks in the reporting system. Many agency employees told *HCN* that they hit a wall when asking for help: supervisors and superintendents sometimes refused to intervene, or Equal Employment Opportunity and employee relations offices ignored requests.

Reynolds said that within 90 days, he planned to add more employee relations and ethics staff, as well as grow the two-person ombuds team, which fields employee complaints. Employees were also encouraged to speak to any manager they can find rather than going up their chain of command. “If you don’t get any action from your supervisor, then find another supervisor, and if you don’t get any action from them, then come to me and I’ll be here,” Zinke said.

The other main concern from employees was how the agency has failed for decades to hold alleged harassers accountable, instead transferring them to other parks or promoting them. Lehnertz said in a press conference call that she has taken steps to improve the termination process and added that she will “find some way” to make sure those employees leave the agency. In the last 18 months, she said seven Grand Canyon employees either retired or resigned when faced with disciplinary action, and two employees were fired. Zinke said that he has recently fired four employees over issues regarding abuse of power or intimidation.

Zinke said that he planned to ask Congress to revise rules so that park superintendents and other agency leaders have more authority to fire employees when there are repeated, credible reports of harassment. “A culture of tolerance of harassment and discrimination is unacceptable for me, and for the president, and we will take action,” he said.

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