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News

Feds look at union charges at CJTS

By AMY L. ZITKA , Middletown Press Staff

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MIDDLETOWN -- Federal civil rights officials are investigating alleged sexual harassment and gender inequity violations against the state Department of Children and Families in connection with the state-run juvenile detention facility.

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights will investigate two complaints against the Unified School District and DCF filed by the Connecticut State Employment Association and signed by more than 150 employees of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School in July. The state department and union officials received notification Wednesday that the federal office received and accepted the complaints alleging the department fostered a sexually hostile work environment.

The complaints allege the school district, which covers the educational program at CJTS, discriminates on the basis of sexual harassment against teachers and other CJTS staff. It also claims the district discriminates on the basis of sex and disability against adjudicated females placed in other facilities.

"When we filed the complaint, our goal was to make the workplace safer for residents and staff," union officials said in a statement. "We want DCF to ensure that employees, including those at CJTS, are no longer harassed, demeaned and demoralized by the residents without any effective resolution. (Today) the Office of Civil Rights has acted."

Within the complaint, it is alleged the district does not address student-on-student and student-on-teacher and staff sexual harassment at CJTS in a prompt and equitable manner, resulting in creating a sexually hostile environment for students, teachers and staff.

The district does not have grievance procedures to address these problems.

The Office of Civil Rights accepted the complaints because they contained alleged violations of Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972, according to the notification letter.

Four issues against the Unified School District will be investigated -- whether the district failed to promptly and equitably respond to complaints of sexual harassment from employees, whether the district has Title IX grievance procedures to address the sex-based discrimination and harassment, according to the notification letter. Six issues against DCF will also be investigated, including four relating to grievance procedures and sexual harassment complaints. The remaining two relate to whether female students were subjected to different treatment than males relating to educational opportunities.

"The Office of Civil Rights has validated our charges that DCF, the school district and CJTS have permitted an atmosphere of sexual harassment, intimidation and gross misconduct," according to a statement on behalf of the CJTS employees.

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"The Office of Civil Rights has accepted our complaint for investigation and possible resolution."

"DCF must ensure that employees, including those at CJTS, are no longer harassed, demeaned and demoralized by the residents without any effective resolution," the statement said. "We have attempted on numerous occasions to remedy this chronic problem in-house. Filing federal charges was one of our last options, but a necessary one to ensure our safety."

DCF officials have had ongoing meetings with CJTS staff since the complaint was filed, DCF spokesman Gary Kleeblatt said Thursday.

"It is a very important issue that we take very seriously," he said of the sexual harassment allegations. "We're fully aware the staff at the training school have extremely difficult jobs and work with challenging kids with extremely challenging behaviors."

"We're extremely concerned the staff feel safe and supported," Kleeblatt said. "We've had ongoing meetings trying to work with the staff to create a better system to respond to the issue. We're committed to supporting the staff."

The issues relating to the alleged gender inequity among the adjudicated juveniles are "extremely complex," he said.

"We are certainly going to cooperate with the Office of Civil Rights and work to address the concerns of our staff and the concerns of the Office of Civil Rights," Kleeblatt added.

"Our staff are extremely committed to do their very best in an incredibly demanding environment," he said. "There's no question it's being taken seriously. We try to do everything to support our staff to feel safe and secure so they can focus on doing a great job."

Union officials said the staff -- including the teachers -- care and want to help the students, but they do not have all the proper tools and resources.

"The bottom line is we're working with kids, but we do not have the tools to deal with youths to deter behavior," said Paula Dillon, a state school teacher and CSEA union steward. "Their behaviors need to be addressed more rigidly. The sexual harassment behaviors on a regular basis."

"The kids swear or berate the staff -- male or female," she said. "The problem has become pervasive. There is a lack of control."

If a student becomes unruly with behavior in the classroom, they can be taken out, union officials said. However, they go sit back in front of their room in their unit and continue the negative behavior in front of the youth service officers.

Regarding internal charges of sexual harassment, there is no recourse on the teacher or staff's part, officials said. If a charge stays with a student, the student can appeal it. However, a staff member can not appeal a charge.

Dillon said a program should be in place that is an opportunity for a student to be educated, as well as being punitive. The students would learn what the appropriate boundaries are and how to act when they return home.

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