

Concerns with Respect to Columbia Association's Treatment of Sexual Harassment Complaints

By Gregg M. Schwind, Board of Directors, Columbia Association

Within the past year, I received a complaint from a resident that a young Columbia Association (CA) lifeguard had been the victim of repeated sexual harassment by other CA employees. The resident stated that the incidents were reported in detail to CA management, but that she was dissatisfied both with CA's response to the harassment complaint and with the continued victimization of the employee who made the complaint.

Since that time, and in my capacity as a member of the CA Board of Directors, I have attempted to obtain more information on the complaint and CA's response to it.

First, I found the complaint to be not only well founded, but also horrifying. No employee, and no parents of any employee, should have to deal with what this employee and parents have been through.

Second, I have learned that CA has revised its policy on sexual harassment, which purports to state a "zero tolerance" policy for any harassing, intimidating, or discriminatory conduct. CA also has issued guidelines on the proper use of social media and electronic communications by CA employees. CA communicates these policies to its employees. In my view these are positive developments.

Third, I have grave concerns with respect to CA's response to the sexual harassment complaint. Notwithstanding my position as a member of the Board of Directors, CA management repeatedly refused, even in a closed meeting, to explain its rationale for its near lack of action with respect to one of the offending employees. The president, general counsel, and head of human resources are united in their refusal to shed light on why CA acted the way it did in the face of truly reprehensible behavior by an employee.

Most recently, in a final attempt to understand what occurred, I made three requests to CA management and the chair of the Board of Directors. First, I asked that the president and Board chair confirm that management would not be permitted again to refuse to answer Board members' questions. After all, the Board has received employee-confidential information in many closed meetings in the past, and there is no legitimate reason to withhold that information here. Neither the president nor the Board chair agreed to this request.

I also requested once again that management provide a detailed rationale for its response to the harassment complaint, and to explain how its actions were consistent with a "zero tolerance" sexual harassment policy. Management, with the Board chair's acquiescence, once again refused.

Finally, I requested that management hire an outside firm to conduct a review on the state of sexual harassment at CA. Such a survey could assess the extent of harassment within the organization, whether CA enforces its policies, whether we encourage complaints, and whether our employees have confidence in their managers and leaders to handle allegations appropriately. Management, again with the acquiescence of the Board chair, refused this request.

Management and the Board chair even refused to place my requests on the Board member tracking log so that the public could see that the requests were made. I conclude from all of this that it is more probable than not that management is hiding facts that it knows reflect poorly on the organization.

I have represented Hickory Ridge on the CA Board of Directors for nine years and, until now, have done so proudly. It is against this backdrop that I am ashamed to report that I have little confidence in the Columbia Association's commitment to preventing sexual harassment, enforcing our policies, or creating an environment where victims are comfortable coming forward. Current and prospective employees, as well as parents of our young employees, should consider this in making future employment-related decisions.

If anyone has any questions or comments, I can be reached at gregg.schwind@ca-board.org. Please keep in mind that I cannot divulge confidential information.