

Under the rug Sexual misconduct shakes FBI's senior ranks

JIM MUSTIAN

WASHINGTON (AP) — An assistant FBI director retired after he was accused of drunkenly groping a female subordinate in a stairwell. Another senior FBI official left after he was found to have sexually harassed eight employees. Yet another high-ranking FBI agent retired after he was accused of blackmailing a young employee into sexual encounters.

An Associated Press investigation has identified at least six sexual misconduct allegations involving senior FBI officials over the past five years, including two new claims brought this week by women who say they were sexually assaulted by ranking agents.

Each of the accused FBI officials appears to have avoided discipline, the AP found, and several were quietly transferred or retired, keeping their full pensions and benefits even when probes substantiated the sexual misconduct claims against them.

Beyond that, federal law enforcement officials are afforded anonymity even after the disciplinary process runs its course, allowing them to land on their feet in the private sector or even remain in law enforcement.

“They’re sweeping it under the rug,” said a former FBI analyst who alleges in a new federal lawsuit that a supervisory special agent licked her face and groped her at a colleague’s farewell party in 2017. She ended up leaving the FBI and has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

“As the premier law enforcement organization that the FBI holds itself out to be, it’s very disheartening when they allow people they know are criminals to retire and pursue careers in law enforcement-related fields,” said the woman, who asked to be identified in this story only by her first name, Becky.

The AP’s count does not include the growing number of high-level FBI supervisors who have failed to report romantic relationships with subordinates in recent years — a pattern that has alarmed investigators with the Office of Inspector General and raised questions about bureau policy.

The recurring sexual misconduct has drawn the attention of Congress and advocacy groups, which have called for whistleblower protections for rank-and-file FBI employees and for an outside entity to review the bureau’s disciplinary cases.

“They need a #MeToo moment,” said U.S. Rep. Jackie Speier, a California Democrat who has been critical of the treatment of women in the male-dominated FBI.

“It’s repugnant, and it underscores the fact that the FBI and many of our institutions are still good ol’-boy networks,” Speier said. “It doesn’t surprise me that, in terms of sexual assault and sexual harassment, they are still in the Dark Ages.”

In a statement, the FBI said it “maintains a zero-tolerance policy toward sexual harassment” and that claims against supervisors have resulted in them being removed from their positions while cases are investigated and adjudicated.

It added that severe cases can result in criminal charges and that the FBI's internal disciplinary process assesses, among other factors, “the credibility of the allegations, the severity of the conduct, and the rank and position of the individuals involved.”

The AP review of court records, Office of Inspector General reports and interviews with federal law enforcement officials identified at least six allegations against senior officials, including an assistant director and special agents in charge of entire field offices, that ranged from unwanted touching and sexual advances to coercion.

None appears to have been disciplined, but another sexual misconduct allegation identified in the AP review of a rank-and-file agent resulted in him losing his security clearance.

The FBI, with more than 35,000 employees, keeps a notoriously tight lid on such allegations. The last time the Office of Inspector General did an extensive probe of sexual misconduct within the FBI, it tallied 343 “offenses” from fiscal years 2009 to 2012, including three instances of “videotaping undressed women without consent.”

Video: Officers, soldiers fired over Fort Hood violence

The latest claims come months after a 17th woman joined a federal lawsuit alleging systemic sexual harassment at the FBI's training academy in Quantico, Virginia. That class-action case claims male FBI instructors made “sexually charged” comments about women needing to “take their birth control to control their moods,” inviting women trainees over to their homes and openly disparaging them.

In one of the new lawsuits filed Wednesday, a former FBI employee identified only as “Jane Doe” alleged a special agent in charge in 2016 retired without discipline and opened a law firm even after he “imprisoned, tortured, harassed, blackmailed, stalked and manipulated” her into having several “non-consensual sexual encounters,” including one in which he forced himself on her in a car. The AP is withholding the name and location of the accused special agent to protect the woman's identity.

“It is the policy and practice of the FBI and its OIG to allow senior executives accused of sexual assault to quietly retire with full benefits without prosecution,” the woman's attorney, David J. Shaffer, alleges in the lawsuit.

One such case involved Roger C. Stanton, who before his abrupt retirement served as assistant director of the Insider Threat Office, a division at Washington headquarters tasked with rooting out leakers and safeguarding national security information.

According to an Inspector General's report concluded this year and obtained by AP through a public records request, Stanton was accused of drunkenly driving a female subordinate home following an after-work happy hour. The woman told investigators that once inside a stairwell of her apartment building, Stanton wrapped his arm around her waist and “moved his hand down onto her bottom” before she was able to get away and hustle up the stairs.

After Stanton left, he called the woman 15 times on her FBI phone and sent her what investigators described as “garbled text” complaining that he could not find his vehicle. The heavily redacted report does not say when the incident happened.

Stanton disputed the woman’s account and told investigators he “did not intend to do anything” and only placed his arm around her because of the “narrowness” of the stairs. But Stanton acknowledged he was “very embarrassed by this event” and “assistant directors should not be putting themselves in these situations.”

Stanton retired in late 2018 after the investigation determined he sexually harassed the woman and sought an improper relationship. He did not respond to requests for comment from AP.

Earlier this year, the Inspector General found that the special agent in charge of the Albany, New York, office, James N. Hendricks, sexually harassed eight subordinates at the FBI.

Hendricks also was not named in the OIG report despite its findings. He was first identified in September by the Albany Times Union. One current and one former colleague of Hendricks confirmed his role in the case to AP.

Hendricks now writes a law enforcement blog in which he touts his FBI accolades but makes no mention of the misconduct allegations. He did not respond to requests for comment.

Becky, the former analyst, told AP she once believed FBI’s “organizational values and mission aligned with how I was raised.” But she was disabused of that notion after reporting to management that Charles Dick, a supervisory special agent at the FBI Training Academy at the time, sexually assaulted her at a farewell party.

Becky told AP her assailant had threatened her at least two times before. “Once while we were waiting for the director he said, ‘I’m going to touch your ass. You know it’s going to happen.’”

“His boorish behavior was well known,” she added. “He was getting away with everything.”

In a federal lawsuit filed Wednesday, Becky accused the former agent of wrapping his arm around her chest while posing for a photograph and “reaching under her and simulating” penetration of her “with his fingers through her jeans.”

Dick denied the charges and was acquitted in state court in Virginia by a judge who ruled it “wholly incredible” that Becky would “stand there and take it and not say anything,” according to a transcript of the proceeding. Dick retired from the FBI months before the Inspector General followed up on Becky’s internal complaint, Becky alleged in her lawsuit, adding she faced retaliation for coming forward.

“It’s much easier to suffer in isolation than it is to go public,” she told AP. “But if I don’t report it, I’m complicit in the cultural and institutionalized cover-up of this sort of behavior.”

AP reporter Eric Tucker contributed to this report.