



Memorandum

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Karen Hawk, Assistant Director, Parks, Recreation & Community Services
Jennifer Lin, HR Division Manager
Raymond Doerner, Recreation Manager

Subject: Sexual Harassment Concerns on the Lakefront

Date: July 15, 2021

Background

On July 12, 2020, Parks, Recreation and Community Services (“PRCS”) lakefront managers (Adam Abajian and Ray Doerner) received the below email from [REDACTED] a seasonal lakefront employee:

“We would like to have a meeting with both of you to discuss an ongoing situation; we would like for you to hear it directly from us. We have created a petition for fair treatment of women at the lakefront. We asked female employees to sign, and to share any personal experiences if they felt comfortable doing so. Absolutely no names were mentioned in our document—we are not pinning the blame on any one person. We were not trying to go about this behind your backs, and we planned to bring this to your attention when we felt ready to do so. Our intention is not to wrongfully accuse or slander anyone; we are just trying to create a work environment in which we can all feel comfortable and safe. Let us know if a time later this week works for you to discuss.”

Best regards,

[REDACTED]

On July 15, 2020, PRCS met with Ms. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and was given a printout of a document which appeared to be the petition signed by current and former female Evanston lakefront staff. The petition contained a number of anecdotes and personal stories of alleged sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, sexism, racism, discrimination, and assault perpetrated by lakefront employees against other lakefront employees. None of the stories were directly attributable to any specific individuals; rather, they were summary, anonymous in nature (i.e., there were no specific victims identified), and contained no dates or timelines. The stories also included examples of physical training as discipline, rampant sexual harassment on the lakefront, narcotic

drug use and underage drinking at off-duty parties involving lakefront employees, and sexual activity by and with minors.

Immediate Action

As soon as PRCS and HR were in receipt of this petition, a meeting was scheduled for July 29, 2020. The attendees were City employees Jennifer Lin (HR), Casey Solomon (HR), Karen Hawk, Ray Doerner and Adam Abajian (PRCS) as well as the four women who sent the email and [REDACTED] (another seasonal lakefront employee).

At that meeting, the following issues were identified by the City: 1) criminal action perpetrated against minors during off-duty hours, 2) narcotic drug use and underage drinking by lakefront employees during off-duty hours, 3) the need for repeated sexual harassment training, 4) investigations that needed to be performed, and 5) the cessation of physical training as discipline. PRCS and HR reiterated the importance of employees coming forward to discuss specific accounts of the conduct identified and encouraged the four women to request that the women who signed the petition speak to HR to share allegations of wrongdoing. PRCS and HR representatives expressed extreme concern with the allegations of criminal sexual assault and statutory rape happening off-duty at parties and advised that the women alleging the criminal behavior needed to call the police. The four women and Mr. [REDACTED] were adamant that the women who signed the petition did not want to come forward to file complaints and did not want a formal investigation. Ms. [REDACTED] and Mr. [REDACTED] specifically stated they wanted none of the lakefront employees to be disciplined or terminated regarding the allegations and that they had promised anonymity to all the women who signed the petition. Additionally, they did not agree with any suggestions of ceasing physical training as discipline and random drug testing. They insisted that the intent of the petition was not to punish any employees, but to share their concerns. Even when HR pressed the matter about the obligation to investigate allegations of sexual harassment and sexual assault, the four women made it very clear that they did not want any investigations to be completed and wanted no police involvement.

Without anyone coming forward to attest to these allegations, PRCS and HR committed to the four women and Mr. [REDACTED] that the alleged culture of sexual misconduct at the lakefront needed to be addressed, through training and remedial action. The City is committed to a zero tolerance policy against sexual harassment and advised the group that incidents of sexual harassment would not be tolerated at the lakefront or any other City department. The City also wanted to consider other recommendations made by the four women and Mr. [REDACTED] about how to improve other work conditions at the lakefront, which included COVID-19 concerns, abusive behavior by beach patrons, the inability to deal with unruly patrons, the power dynamic amongst staff, and the use of physical training as discipline.

On August 5 and 6 of 2020, the City required all lakefront staff to attend a live sexual harassment training (via Zoom) which specifically addressed the prohibition of sexual

harassment and sexual misconduct by and between lakefront employees. PRCS and HR had another meeting with the four women and Mr. [REDACTED] on August 14, 2020, where all in attendance collaborated on a plan to ensure safety and communication for the remainder of the 2020 season. This plan included designating a trusted PRCS employee who would serve as the HR liaison to receive any and all complaints or concerns, a reminder to all staff about the prohibition against sexual harassment and consequences of violations, a reiteration of a safe reporting process, and a commitment for a better partnership between the Evanston Police Department and lakefront staff for more active involvement in incidents with difficult patrons.

2021 Season Preparation

In the Fall of 2020, PRCS reached out to Ms. [REDACTED] and Mr. [REDACTED] and provided them the opportunity to be a part of the 2021 season preparations. On February 19, 2021, PRCS and HR met and shared the remedial and additional training that the City would require of lakefront staff and reiterated the City's commitment to ensuring a healthy workplace for all staff at the lakefront. They were satisfied with changes being instituted for 2021, which included some updated policies about the minimum age of certain lakefront employees, equitable compensation, physical training to be used for training purposes only, repeated sexual harassment training, and the power dynamic amongst lakefront staff. PRCS chose not to rehire one male employee where allegations were reported by two different female employees. There were no other allegations made against any other lakefront employees, and no other returning employees were denied employment. PRCS also hired Aaron Mohrenweiser as the Assistant Lakefront Coordinator to manage lakefront operations, essentially serving as the highest ranking seasonal employee on the lakefront.

HR Manager Jennifer Lin spoke with [REDACTED] on June 26, 2021, who stated that she had witnessed a change on the lakefront and a higher level of staff professionalism. Assistant PRCS Director Karen Hawk also witnessed a higher level of staff professionalism at all of the beaches and in the beach office, observing positive interactions with lakefront staff and improved morale. Erika Doroghazi, the PRCS liaison to HR, also observed more positive interactions between staff and advised that the open lines of communication between beach staff, PRCS and HR remain.

PRCS & HR believes that it has taken the necessary steps to ensure a safe and healthy workplace at the lakefront, while also respecting employees' privacy and wishes (by not repeatedly requesting individuals meet with HR or PRCS to give personal accounts of the allegations where it has been resisted). Unfortunately, neither HR nor PRCS was able to further investigate many of these allegations because staff refused to speak with HR and/or PRCS about the alleged incidents. Due to the anonymous nature of the petition and the specific request that no investigations be performed, the City was very limited in any future actions it could take. Both HR and PRCS repeatedly encouraged the four women who came forward to talk to the women who signed the petition and encourage them to file complaints with HR and/or to call the police. HR and PRCS also

reminded staff that they were DCFS mandated reporters, obligated to report child abuse and neglect.

PRCS remains committed to ensuring everyone's safety and maintaining a healthy work environment at the lakefront and look forward to continuing to work with those who have spoken to the issues to improve operations and employee morale.