

#HarassmentFreeAlbany Campaign

About the Sexual Harassment Working Group

The Sexual Harassment Working Group (SHWG) consists of seven former New York State Legislative staffers, all of whom experienced or reported sexual harassment while working for the State. After witnessing the Republican-led Senate rush through a vote on sexual harassment legislation, and the Governor propose additional problematic legislation in his Spring 2018 Executive Budget Proposal for FY2019 budget, we released a [collective statement](#), urging the Legislature and Governor Cuomo to conduct a meaningful, transparent process to establish the state's sexual harassment laws. Instead, laws were passed without sufficient input of experts, advocates, or victims. Based on our extensive review, it was clear the new laws would not protect workers from the egregious misconduct that continues to dominate Albany headlines.

Members of the SHWG

Leah Hebert, Former Chief of Staff to former Assemblyman Vito Lopez

Rita Pasarell, Former Legislative Counsel and Deputy Chief of Staff to former Assemblyman Vito Lopez

Tori Burhans Kelly, Former Legislative Aide to former Assemblyman Vito Lopez

Eliyanna Kaiser, Former Chief of Staff to former Assemblyman Micah Kellner

Danielle Bennett, Former Administrative Assistant to former Assemblyman Micah Kellner

Erica Vladimer, Former Education Policy Analyst and Counsel for the Independent Democratic Conference

Elizabeth Crothers, Former Legislative Aide to Assemblyman

Our Work:

On June 19, 2018 the SHWG held a [panel discussion](#), open to the public, where we presented our own set of [policy recommendations](#), drafted in consultation with state and national experts and advocates; most importantly, these recommendations were victim-centered, as they were based on our own experiences.

The SHWG also began calling on the NYS Legislature to hold public hearings, the first step in a stronger process by which to hear from experts, directly impacted individuals, and members of the public to develop better laws. We are proud to say that, after 265 days of requesting a public hearing, Leader Stewart-Cousins and Speaker Heastie announced a joint legislative public hearing on sexual harassment in the workplace to be held on February 13th (discussed more below)

Since the release of our policy recommendations, the SHWG has:

- Launched our website, HarassmentFreeAlbany.com;
- [submitted a public comment](#) to the Department of Labor on their model policy, complaint form, and training;
- [sent a letter to the United States Senate Judiciary Committee](#) in support of Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford;
- partnered with Assembly Member Simotas in drafting [legislative bills](#) based on our policy recommendations, which are also sponsored by Senator Biaggi in the Senate, and
- continued to engage in extensive outreach with other elected officials, experts and advocates to ensure there is an on-going conversation about the need for stronger protections

Joint Legislative Public Hearings

The SHWG is cognizant of the need for workers across all industries to have a seat at the table when crafting workplace harassment and discrimination protections. Unfortunately, many- if not most- were left out of the conversation last year as negotiations took place during the budget process. Just as important, the SHWG understands the need to have these conversations largely in the public sphere. Workers tend to experience sexual harassment behind closed doors; the healing process, including seeking redress, is also shrouded in secrecy, forcing targets to carry the burden of shame that they don't deserve.

That is why we were adamant that our Legislature hold public hearings. Shedding light on this crisis is crucial for many reasons. It sends a message to victims that our elected officials are ready and willing to sit with them in the discomfort of their experiences, and it provides a unique forum for victims to educate our elected officials on the loopholes that exist in our current protections and reporting processes. Creating a public space where victims, elected officials, advocates and experts can come together and glean patterns from victims' experiences is how New York will truly become a leader in workplace protections.

Working with our allies, the SHWG helped draft letters to the 2017-18 [Senate](#) and [Assembly](#) leadership requesting public hearings, not only from advocacy organizations, but from 22 Senators and 23 Assembly members. Attorney General candidate [Zephyr Teachout](#) and Gubernatorial candidate [Cynthia Nixon](#) stood with us at press conferences where they called on the Governor and Legislature to hold public hearings; [other state-wide candidates](#) also publicly supported our call for public hearings, including Attorney General Tish James, GOP Gubernatorial Candidate Marc Molinaro, and Independent Gubernatorial Candidate [Stephanie Miner](#).

On October 15th, we held [our biggest press conference to date](#), once again urging Senate and Assembly leadership to hold public hearings. Senators, Assembly members, candidates, advocates, and union members stood with us on the steps of New York City Hall, highlighting the work that was still needed to protect employees across all industries, and that the first step in passing the strongest laws in the nation was to convene a public hearing.

On January 17th, 2019 [legislative leadership announced](#) that a joint legislative public hearing will be held on February 13th.

Preparing for the Hearing by Working Together:

The SHWG has already started extensive outreach to experts and advocates, urging them to join us in testifying at the hearing. We are also asking that they reach out to their networks; there is no set end-time for the hearing, and we want to ensure our elected officials hear from a broad range of stakeholders from across the state, especially workers in various industries that have experienced sexual harassment.

We also want to ensure that we get as many elected officials as we can to attend the hearing; while three committee chairs from both the Senate and Assembly will be present, it is important that every elected official is educated about the lack of protections that need to be addressed. As we plan our own outreach strategy, we are asking our contacts to seek commitments from their elected official partners that they will attend the hearing as well.

The scope of the hearing is broadly defined as "sexual harassment in the workplace," which gives ample flexibility in crafting testimony. The SHWG will focus on connecting our experiences to the existing bills, as well as the Governor's Executive Budget sexual harassment proposals. We're asking advocates

that have a national presence to highlight laws that have passed in other state legislatures and New York should consider, especially the importance of amending the “severe or pervasive” standard, and the significance of protecting state/legislative employees. We are also urging New York based advocates to weigh in on Assembly member Simotas’ bills.