



Manhattan District Attorney's Office Implements a Work-Related Sexual Violence Team

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The Manhattan District Attorney, Cyrus Vance, Jr., recently announced the implementation of a Work-Related Sexual Violence team. The announcement comes in the wake of growing awareness of sexual misconduct in the workplace.

The new task force will focus on engaging and encouraging alleged victims of work-related sexual violence to report their incidents. The team will be led by Assistant District Attorney, Vanessa Puzio, who has twelve years of experience investigating and prosecuting sexual assault cases. In addition, the employment initiative will be staffed by fifteen Assistant District Attorneys and a social worker. The Assistants will receive training in forensic experiential trauma interview techniques, which are designed to minimize the use of questions that could lead survivors to relive their assaults.

District Attorney Vance explained, "Work-related relationships grant predators unique access to people who are vulnerable to sexual abuse and assault due to the power imbalance inherent in so many work hierarchies. When an act of work-related sexual misconduct constitutes a crime, it is not enough that the abuser loses his job or his industry cachet—justice demands, and survivors deserve, that criminal abusers be held accountable in court."

Since October 2017, the Manhattan District Attorney's office received over 120 calls from victims who experience sexual misconduct in the workplace. This was a sharp increase after only receiving 20 calls earlier that year. Chief Assistant District Attorney Karen Friedman-Agnifilo commented that the #Metoo movement has "shown survivors that it's okay to come forward." The employment focused team will encourage anyone who believes a sex crime has occurred in Manhattan to call the Sex Crimes 24/7/365 Hotline. In addition to victims, anyone aware of work-related sexual misconduct, including company executives and human resources personnel, are encouraged to call the Hotline.

This initiative is the first of its kind in New York and will likely be the prototype for similar initiatives across the country. It is now more important than ever for employers to review their sexual harassment policies and training programs to make them as effective as possible.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding employment or education-related issues, please contact James G. Ryan at jryan@cullenanddykman.com or at 516-357-3750.

Thank you to Victoria Jaus, a law clerk at Cullen and Dykman, for her assistance with this blog post.