

El Dorado County probation employees tired of workplace harassment

By Kathryn Reed

Chaotic could be one word to describe the El Dorado County Probation Department. Discriminatory, dysfunctional and secretive would be other words.

“The kids aren’t the problem, management is,” said one person who recently severed ties with the department.

Rank and file employees are fearful of talking to *Lake Tahoe News* on the record and most higher ups won’t even talk.



The Juvenile Treatment Center in South Lake Tahoe is one place county probation officers say is less than ideal to work.

Photo/LTN

When word got out last week that *Lake Tahoe News* was asking questions, interim Chief Probation Officer Vince Janette sent the following email to all probation staff, “Recently a few staff members were contacted off duty by the media. I would like to take this opportunity to remind all staff of policy

IV2 Contact with the News Media. Please take a moment to review the policy and report any contacts via the chain of command. If you are contacted at home or in the community this policy still applies.”

He then attached the policy in the email, which was given to *LTN* by someone other than Janette. Part of the policy says only the chief of the department or a designated manager may speak with the media.

It also says, “Staff is prohibited from writing letters to the media or otherwise communicating with the media as a representative of the Probation Department.”

When *Lake Tahoe News* asked Janette if he thought there is a morale issue within the department, he said, “I will not comment on that.”

When asked to comment on whether harassment issues are ignored, he said, “I haven’t heard that.”

According to the people who spoke off the record with *Lake Tahoe News*, Janette is one of the harassers.

Change in leadership

Janette is now in charge of probation because Greg Sly, who is still technically the chief, is out on leave until he officially retires Sept. 13. Sly is getting full pay and medical benefits until then.

At first Janette said, “I’d rather not comment” – in response to whether he applied to be the chief permanently. Then he added, “I will not be our next chief.”

When Sly was asked to explain what is really going on today at probation, he emailed *LTN*, “Current direction from the CAO and County Counsel is that all media questions are referred to them. Therefore, I need to refer you to their offices.”

Terri Daly is the county's chief administrative officer and Ed Knapp the county counsel. Neither is communicating with *Lake Tahoe News*.

In an email obtained by *LTN* written June 7 to staff Sly says he is remaining out on medical leave.

Sly's email says, "I wish my career and term as your chief would be ending under different circumstances, but sometimes doing the right thing pays off a little differently than one would like. During my entire 29 year law enforcement and community corrections career, I always pushed for true justice on all fronts. But as I have often said, 'Sometimes Justice just isn't Just.'"

Sly was out on administrative leave from Sept. 28-Dec. 12 as well. At that time Gary Hudgeons, then assistant chief probation officer, was put in charge of the department. He abruptly left when Sly returned to work.

Sly has not always gotten along with the current CAO, but the truth to why he keeps being put on leave is not forthcoming because officials say it is a personnel issue.

Feeling threatened

Those who are left to do the work at the South Lake Tahoe and Placerville detention centers say there is a culture of harassment and discrimination within the department. This includes workers at the facilities housing the youths as well as those working in the field.

And it's not just women who have been harassed. One guy chose to take a demotion to get away from a harassing boss. Another left to work at a coffeehouse.

"Within the department retaliation is alive and well and strong. If you speak out, you will absolutely be gone," one employee said. "There is no personality conflict; it's a power

and control issue.”

Sometimes the harassment is because a person is outspoken, sometimes it's for having a quirky personality, sometimes for just not fitting in with the established older-white-male power structure, and other times it's for reasons that are not obvious.

But it's predominately women who are subjected to the hostile work environment – unless they are having an affair with one of their male superiors or their husband is a cop.

Several people have left the department this year. They are fed up with the treatment, filing grievances and getting nowhere but being retaliated against.

Harassment, according to those who spoke with *LTN*, is verbal and sexual – and ongoing.

Some complaints are investigated, some are not. But even when they are, they often end with the harasser not being reprimanded and the employee reaching a financial settlement with the county so they will go away.

One employee said they look around and ask, “Why is the person who all complaints were directed toward still here and the person who instigated the investigation now gone?”