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NYPD agrees to improve sexual assault investigations as part of million-dollar settlement



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The NYPD has agreed to make major changes to the unit that investigates sex crimes as part of a million-dollar settlement with alleged sexual assault survivors who said the department mishandled their cases.

Jennifer Welch Demski and Alison Turkos filed a lawsuit in 2019 accusing the NYPD of traumatizing them and other people who report sexual assaults to the police. They said investigators in the special victims divisions were overwhelmed with massive caseloads and often lacked proper training or experience. As a result, Demski and Turkos said, investigators ridiculed them, mistreated them and botched the investigations into their cases.

On Thursday, the NYPD agreed to pay \$1.025 million to Welch Demski, Turkos and their lawyers. The department also committed to a list of policy changes that aim to improve how the special victims division responds to reports of sex crimes.

Turkos said pursuing this case for more than six years has tested their patience, but that the outcome means hopefully no other survivor will endure the same treatment.

“One of the things that many survivors want to hear is some type of public statement that what happened to you mattered,” Turkos said in an interview.

The NYPD did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday afternoon.

As part of the settlement, the NYPD pledged to:

- Only assign investigators to the special victims division with at least four years of experience.
- Ensure there are QR codes with information about resources for sexual assault survivors throughout every police precinct.
- Limit investigators to an average of 64 new cases per year and 20 open cases at any given time.
- Share data with the plaintiffs' lawyers on caseloads and the number of investigators in the division every six months.
- Unless there's a hiring freeze, maintain a salaried position dedicated to training the special victims division, which should be selected with input from advocates for sexual assault survivors.
- Ensure that every investigator in the special victims division's adult squad attends a three-day refresher training each year.
- Convene leaders of the special victims division and advocates for sexual assault survivors every six months to review a sample of investigations and get feedback on how investigators handled their interactions with survivors.

Welch Demski said in the lawsuit that investigators told her she hadn't been raped because she didn't fight back, after she reported that her partner at the time removed her tampon and sexually assaulted her without a condom while she was asleep. She said a sergeant told her she looked

attractive in her driver's license photo and also said that he regularly has sex with his wife while she's asleep, and his wife doesn't report his behavior as rape.

Turkos was allegedly kidnapped by a Lyft driver and raped at gunpoint by the driver and two other men. They said in the lawsuit that the detective assigned to the case rarely provided any information about the investigation, especially after Turkos became emotional during a meeting. The lawsuit also accuses the detective of not taking basic steps to help them remember what happened, because their memories of the event were unclear.

The settlement comes nearly three years after the U.S. Department of Justice's civil rights division opened an investigation into the special victims division, following complaints from Turkos and other survivors who said the NYPD was engaging in gender-biased policing and failing to adequately investigate sexual assaults. But the future of that investigation is uncertain as the civil rights division scales back its oversight of local police departments under President Donald Trump's administration and as attorneys leave en masse.

"When the Trump administration came in, we really had to grapple with the idea that the DOJ investigation was most likely going to just be stagnant," Turkos said. "I had some conversations with some folks that if and when this lawsuit and my case came to settlement, then it might be the closest thing that we could see to some kind of consent decree that we would see from the DOJ."



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Natalie Baldassarre, a DOJ spokesperson, declined to comment on the status of its investigation into the NYPD.

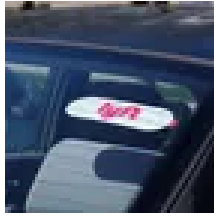
Mariann Wang, an attorney representing Turkos and Welch Demski, said the settlement serves as a commitment from the NYPD to take sexual assault survivors as seriously as they do other victims. She said she hopes having the settlement in writing, signed by a judge, will help to change the culture within the department.

"Will it happen automatically with a snap of the fingers? Of course not. Survivors have seen that for decades as they try to change things," Wang said. "But I do think that this is a step in the right

direction.”

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