

## Lawmakers searching for consensus on sexual-harassment bills

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### ASSOCIATED PRESS

BATON ROUGE – Louisiana lawmakers agree they want to strengthen state policies against sexual harassment. But they have gotten bogged down on what approach to take and whether to hide some of the harassment allegations and investigation details from the public.

Three proposals aimed at requiring government wide anti-harassment training and policies are pending in the Senate. All three measures initially emerged from a Senate committee, only to be sent back Tuesday evening in hopes of reaching consensus on one bill.

“We want to ensure and tighten up our sexual-harassment laws and prevent this kind of behavior in state government,” said Sen. Karen Carter Peterson, the New Orleans Democrat who chairs the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee that will rehear the measures. But she said the lack of a unified approach is “creating confusion.”

Female lawmakers called for a review of state policies against sexual misconduct after accusations across the nation spurred by the #MeToo movement unseated people in positions of power. Several high profile Louisiana officials have been accused of sexual harassment.

“The issue right now is that state law does not currently mandate training on how to identify, report or investigate sexual harassment, and we have no consistent policies, no uniform sexual harassment policy,” said Sen. Sharon Hewitt, a Slidell Republican.

Bills sponsored by Hewitt, Sen. Regina Barrow and Rep. Barbara Carpenter aim to change that. The proposal by Carpenter, a Baton Rouge Democrat, has advanced the furthest, winning support from the House.

Carpenter’s bill would require state and local government agencies to enact anti-sexual-harassment policies that include a process for handling complaints, a ban against retaliation when someone files a complaint, and mandatory one-hour prevention training each year. The other measures take similar approaches, with varying details about specific requirements.

The most significant disagreement has emerged over whether to keep certain details of sexual-misconduct investigations shielded from public view.

Lawmakers say they're trying to balance a level of confidentiality that makes victims and witnesses feel comfortable to report sexual harassment with transparency about the actions of employees whose salaries are financed by taxpayers.

Barrow, a Baton Rouge Democrat, filed a separate proposal to broadly exempt from public view all documents or records involving allegations of sexual harassment or discrimination at public agencies, a bill backed by Gov. John Bel Edwards.

Barrow and the governor's office said they wanted privacy both for victims and people falsely accused, but public-records advocates said the blanket concealment goes too far. Barrow said she has not moved the bill because she hasn't been able to find a happy medium between the two viewpoints.

Peterson inserted a similar, broadly written exemption into Carpenter's bill – and that has raised similar concerns that it would shield nearly all information about harassment in government.

Hewitt tried to rewrite her bill on the Senate floor to offer more access to records.

"The taxpayers do have a right to some of that information," she said. Several senators resisted her approach, saying it would release too much. Negotiations continue between senators and government watchdog groups.

A review of records found Louisiana has paid at least \$2.7 million since 2004 to settle nearly four dozen sexual-harassment claims.

Most recently, Louisiana agreed to pay \$85,000 to settle claims that former Edwards aide Johnny Anderson sexually harassed a woman when they worked together in the governor's office. Anderson left his position but denies wrongdoing.

Meanwhile, a lawsuit is pending against Secretary of State Tom Schedler, accusing him of harassing a woman who worked in his office and punishing her when she rebuffed advances. Schedler's spokeswoman said Schedler had a consensual sexual relationship with the woman, a claim the woman's lawyer denied.