

#METOO Sparks a Helpline

January 8, 2019

The #METOO movement spawned greater awareness of sexual harassment and new laws in several States. Illinois reacted to #METOO in Public Act 100-588 by creating a "Helpline" for persons experiencing harassment or discrimination in the workplace or housing. See: <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/100/100-0588.htm> While Missouri does not have a designated helpline, the MO Commission on Human Rights does have a hotline for complaints (1-877-781-4236)

The Illinois Helpline is up and running at 1 (877) 236-7703 or <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/sexualharassment/Pages/default.aspx> so check it out. I like the idea of a Helpline; if done properly, it can give accurate answers quickly and point the caller in the right direction for their next step.

In my 33 years of practicing law, I have represented individuals who experienced sexual harassment; I represented employers and supervisors accused of harassment: and been in-house counsel tasked with defending colleagues accused of harassment. This is such a touchy (pun intended!) subject that I want to give a nod to Illinois for this innovation. In private practice, I encountered employees who had such wildly incorrect information about sexual harassment and its remedies. Yes, the harasser will be informed of your identity at some point in the investigation and no, you cannot force your employer to fire the harasser. While in-house, I ran up against some supervisors with outdated ideas of acceptable behavior at the workplace. I remember explaining that, yes, the company can be held responsible for the racy email jokes you passed around; and no, you cannot remedy the problem by immediately firing the employee complaining of harassment. You might laugh, but I have had similar scenarios presented.

We will find out how effective the Helpline is next year when the Illinois Department of Human Rights compiles its annual report on how many calls have come into the Helpline and what type of complaints.

My role these days is to mediate harassment claims and while they are super-tough to resolve, they are super-rewarding to solve. Workers want to be respected and for their work to be valued. Employers want employees who show up, work hard and make good decisions. Sex gets in the way of all these goals. But sex is not going away, so the American workplace is finding a way to adapt and a Helpline is a useful tool in that adaptation.