

[‘Soul crushing’: Seven former dispatchers describe toxic work environment at PA Game Commission](#)

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The Pennsylvania Game Commission has launched an investigation and suspended one employee for the duration after *Broad + Liberty* presented new allegations of a toxic work environment in the commission’s dispatch center.

Seven former dispatchers for the PGC say they were subjected to a workplace where a supervisor made sexual comments about female employees, wished violence on game wardens, and used mandatory training sessions to humiliate staff. The harassment was so pervasive and severe that multiple employees reported hair and weight loss, panic attacks, blood pressure spikes, and even fleeting suicidal ideations.

The former employees further allege their appeals for help to supervisors and to the commission’s human resources department were ignored.

The PGC acknowledges it collected some complaints about the dispatch center in February 2024, but said many of the claims presented in this report were new to the agency. “As such, the agency immediately commenced another investigation. One of the employees has been suspended pending the results of that investigation,” PGC spokesman Travis Lau said in a statement. The commission did not name the suspended employee.

The commission further said it “values the meaningful work of all its employees, and harassment, discrimination, and retaliation in the workplace will not be tolerated.”

These new claims, alongside [previous reporting](#) by *Broad + Liberty*, reveal a pattern of an unresponsive HR department charged with promoting a safe and healthy work environment for the commission’s 800 or so employees. It also marks at least the third credible claim in the last four years of a culture of mistrust and retaliation regardless of the specific department.

“My blood pressure went to almost stroke level,” said Heather Kline, who worked eighteen years at a regional dispatch office before transferring to Harrisburg as the dispatch office was being centralized. “I had to up my anxiety medication. I had to up my blood pressure medication. My husband is a paramedic — he would take my blood pressure to make sure I was still okay.”

“Soul crushing,” said Sarah Hogbin, who spent ten months at the dispatch center before being fired. “I loved being part of keeping my community safe.”

Pam McCombie, who had worked as a dispatcher at a regional office said, “I loved what I did. I absolutely loved it, but the environment in Harrisburg was awful.”

PGC dispatchers answer calls about wildlife, but most importantly, they assist the commission’s more than 100 game wardens in their law enforcement duties such as ensuring compliance with hunting licenses, arresting poachers, and more.

In previous years, the PGC operated six different regional dispatch offices, splitting the state into northern and southern, then dividing those further by east, west, and central. From 2021 to 2022, the commission began the process of centralizing the entire dispatch operation into its Harrisburg headquarters. The sources who cooperated with this article say the management of the new centralized headquarters was the genesis of the problems.

‘The things I would do to her’

The former employees say management of the consolidated dispatch center was more like a clique or a “boy’s club.” At its center was John “Dug” Hudson, a dispatch supervisor who was a constant stream of sexually charged remarks, harassment, bullying, and retaliation, they say.

“He would walk away from speaking to a female dispatcher and be like, ‘Oh, the things I would do to her’ under his breath, but very clearly loud enough for other people to hear,” said Christy, who worked as a dispatcher for about three years and asked that her real name not be used.

Shelby Lingle, who had previously worked as a Dauphin County 911 dispatcher said the sexual remarks from Hudson were prolific.

“He literally would say things about certain [people], ‘Oh, I’d like to f*** that. I’d like to hit that.’ Or, it would be the opposite, like, ‘Oh, could you imagine ***king that? Could you imagine that with no clothes on?’ It would go either good or bad, but it was all the time,” Lingle said.

Referencing a female game warden, “[Dug] would say, ‘That’s a tall tree I’d like to climb.’ And then he would make comments about [a female dispatcher]... ‘Oh, the things I would want to do to her,’” said Riley Czech. Although working as a dispatcher was one of the first jobs Czech held, it was one she nevertheless felt naturally oriented towards given that her father was a game warden at the time with decades of service, and her mother worked for the Fish and Boat Commission.

Working with Hudson was “walking on eggshells” according to Czech, who also says Hudson would hunt for mistakes from the dispatchers only for the purpose of harassing,

but never for identifying ways to improve performance. “As soon as Dug would leave, the whole room would relax.”

The southeast and southwest regions were the busiest and most difficult regions to dispatch, and Hudson used it to his advantage, especially when trying to define who was in favor or not. “Dug had said, ‘If you end up getting Southwest, you’re better off calling off because somebody has it out for you,’” Czech said.

“Dug Hudson is the one that pulled me into his office and screamed at me with the door open,” Hogbin said. “There’s too many chiefs and not enough Indians there. And once you get that manager label, then you pretty much can do whatever you want to anybody.”

Two of the sources, Pam McCombie and Heather Kline, are notable because they are a touchstone of how the new central office differed from dispatch at the regional offices, where each had eighteen years experience before agreeing to either move to or commute to Harrisburg.

“Once I got to the Harrisburg office, it was almost like I was an outcast,” McCombie remembered. “I did voice my concern plenty of times on the [harassing or crude] language, and they just sort of seemed to brush it off and make a joke of it.”

Hudson’s alleged malice extended beyond his direct employees. On multiple occasions Hudson would exclaim loud enough for the entire center to hear that he wished violence on various employees — including game wardens, according to Lingle and Czech.

“If a particular warden would key up on the radio before Hudson would answer the warden, he would say, ‘Oh, I hope you get shot in the f***ing face,’ Just that kind of stuff. And that’s very wrong, especially in that profession when, as a dispatcher, it’s our job to help those officers get home to their family safely every night,” Lingle said.

Management enabled the harassment

Hudson’s immediate supervisor, Nicholas (Nick) Sechrist, didn’t act as a check on his frontline supervisor, but instead, as part of the club, directly enabled his behavior, the sources said.

Christy says she worked diligently to create numerous training materials, then weeks later, Hudson and Sechrist presented them to the entire dispatch center as if they had created them.

“I pulled them aside. It was not in front of anyone, but I did actually sit in the office with them and bring it up to them that, ‘Hey, this is my material. This is a lot of the stuff that we worked really hard on, and now your name is on it,’” Christy recalled. “And I remember Nick

looked at me and it was the three of us in a closed office, those two and me. And he said, ‘I could write you up for insubordination for saying that.’”

Christy also says she raised numerous issues about Dug with Nick, to no avail.

“[Nick] would just cover for him,” Christy said. “He’d say, ‘Oh, that’s Dug.’ And I remember saying, ‘That’s not good enough.’ So Nick was very aware of the things that were said because most of them were said in front of him, but he knew what was going on.”

Lingle confirmed, saying Sechrist frequently brushed Hudson’s behavior aside, saying “That’s just Dug. Oh, it’s Dug, we know how he is.”

Four of the sources for this article shared similar stories of Nick and Dug getting drunk on their own time off, yet harassing employees.

“They would get drunk all the time and just call people,” Heist said. “They’d even do it if you were working — it didn’t matter. I know the one guy, his name was [name withheld], they called him like 30 times while he was working, his phone just would not stop ringing.”

She remembers getting a voicemail from them as they were clearly inebriated.

“You could hear Nick saying, ‘Dug, I f***ing love you. I’d do anything for you.’ They were saying, ‘F*** that bitch’ — meaning [a former female dispatch supervisor]. It’s a two to three minute long voicemail.” Heist searched her phone records for the voicemail but was unable to locate it given she believed she deleted it two years ago.

Stress Judgement Response Training

Training at the facility was virtually nonexistent, the group said — at least, that is, until management created a protocol called Stress Judgment Response Training, or SJRT. The idea was to put a dispatcher in a difficult emergency situation to gauge strengths and weaknesses.

The dispatchers say they were supportive of the idea of what SJRT should have been, but it instantly devolved into a hazing ritual.

The training would happen in a room not far from the main dispatch floor.

“I would say 90 percent of it was just to make fun of people, especially because there’s one dispatcher, the tiny room, and there’s four or five other people doing the grading or whatever. And it was just a way for — Dug was mostly on the radio as the fake warden — so it was a way for him to just scream on the radio and be funny, not really being funny,” Christy said.

She further remembers a male coworker who broke down not long after his SJRT session.

“He looked at me and he screamed at me because he was so overwhelmed and no one said anything... He’s like, ‘This is insane. This isn’t even training. You’re just doing this to make fun of us.’ And that’s essentially what it was.”

Hogbin says the SJRT harassment started before the training would even happen.

“They specifically tell you that they are going to f*** with you. I mean, that was a huge red flag right there.”

Heist broke down, too.

“When I was done with the training, I stepped out. I was just a little emotional... one of the other coworkers, Riley, came out to comfort me. And when Dug found out that she was outside with me, he came outside and screamed at both of us... ‘Get back to your station. You can’t be out here. Allie, you’re not supposed to tell her s***.’ And I said, ‘I didn’t tell her anything. I just came out to get fresh air and she checked on me.’”

Most of the former dispatchers say there were never any follow-up sessions to highlight strengths and weaknesses revealed by the training, or to provide corrective feedback — the kind of instruction that could potentially make the training productive. Lingle said she received off-the-cuff feedback immediately after the exercise, but that it was “very informal.”

Support lacking

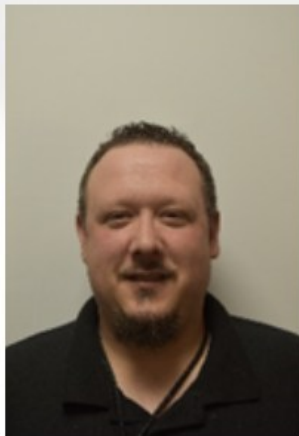
Some dispatchers complained, or at least tried to. Others said the “boys club” atmosphere was so pervasive that they felt helpless, that complaints would only result in more harm. Given the closeness between Sechrist and Hudson, the only available avenue was the dispatch director, Mike Reeder. But the dispatchers say Reeder was seldom available.

“At any given moment, you could swing a cat and hit at least four managers — unless you needed them, then they would hide,” Hogbin said.

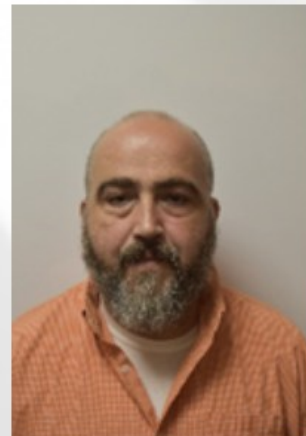
“I just feel like Reeder just didn’t care because again, he was buddies with [Nick and Dug] half the time,” Heist said. “I feel like Reeder wasn’t even in his office. We’d go to try to talk to Reeder about something and he was never there that we could — [so] our option was Nick. But if it’s a complaint *about* Nick, how am I supposed to complain to Nick?”



Michael Reeder
Director



Nick Sechrist
Asst. Director



John Hudson
Dispatch Supervisor

Source: PGC email obtained via Right to Know request

Czech vividly remembers February 14, 2024 as the day she had an appointment with two of the PGC’s top HR officials, Delynn Steffen and Ashley Boylan.

“We had talked about the officer safety issues, the supervisor that continued with the sexual harassment [saying things about a particular] dispatcher’s mom, hiding things [that belonged to the dispatchers], retaliation concerns, and the misuse of time and unprofessionalism” of Hudson.

Czech says if anything came from the meeting, she was left unaware of it. Additionally, she felt as though she was retaliated against for speaking up. Certain projects she was involved in such as going on ride-alongs with various game wardens were suddenly taken away.

As Czech walked out of her HR meeting, she passed Lingle, who was also on her way in — and who quickly felt let down by what happened next.

“I feel that [the meeting] was kind of guided a certain way. I was only to answer the questions they asked, and I feel those questions were preset,” Lingle said. “I didn’t get to mention half of what I wanted to. They didn’t seem like they cared to listen to other specific things that I felt were very important.”

HR ended the February 14 meeting by telling Lingle that if she had any future concerns — anything at all — she was to go directly to Mike Reeder.

“I will go directly to Mike Reeder, but I don’t know that that’s going to help because that’s why I’m sitting in this office — because I went to Mike Reeder and it didn’t work well for me,” Lingle said.

When presented with the allegations described in this report, the commission acknowledged receiving similar complaints in February 2024.

“In some of the instances mentioned in this media inquiry, the Game Commission can confirm that its Human Resource (HR) Office received similar complaints in February 2024, from former employees working within its Centralized Dispatch Center,” Lau said.

“During HR’s review, it was determined that most of the allegations referred to incidents that reportedly occurred many months before HR was made aware. Despite HR’s best efforts to corroborate these claims, PGC was unable to identify credible evidence that substantiated the allegations,” Lau continued. “Nonetheless, the Game Commission’s Work Rules and the Pennsylvania’s Governor’s Office Executive Order 1980-18 Amended – Code of Conduct were reinforced with the parties involved.”

But the impact wasn’t visible to those on the dispatch floor.

“I would say they [HR] did nothing,” Lingle said. “And in my own mind, I would say they’re part of the problem.”

Hair loss, weight loss, panic attacks

The toll of the toxic workplace ranged far beyond the simple consequence of an employee who no longer enjoyed their work. Nearly all of the sources for this article reported feeling real physical impacts, some of them severe. Others suffered real financial losses.

“I lost a lot of weight. My hair was falling out, I was so stressed out,” Christy said. “I had gone to the dermatologist, my regular doctor, got blood taken to try and figure out what is going on. Do I have an autoimmune disease? Why is my hair literally falling out in clumps?”

Hogbin reported similar problems. “Physically I lost a lot of weight,” she said. “I stopped eating. I wasn’t sleeping. I was always scared I was going to lose my job. I was not taking care of myself. I was depressed all the time.”

As Kline was quoted in this story’s introduction, her husband, a paramedic, began monitoring her blood pressure because she was experiencing “near stroke level” spikes.

Heist, who had broken down into tears after her SJRT, said her misery was unescapable.

“I just would wake up miserable. I’d go home miserable on my drive into work. I’d sit there and feel like I’d rather just drive my car into another car off the highway because it just got

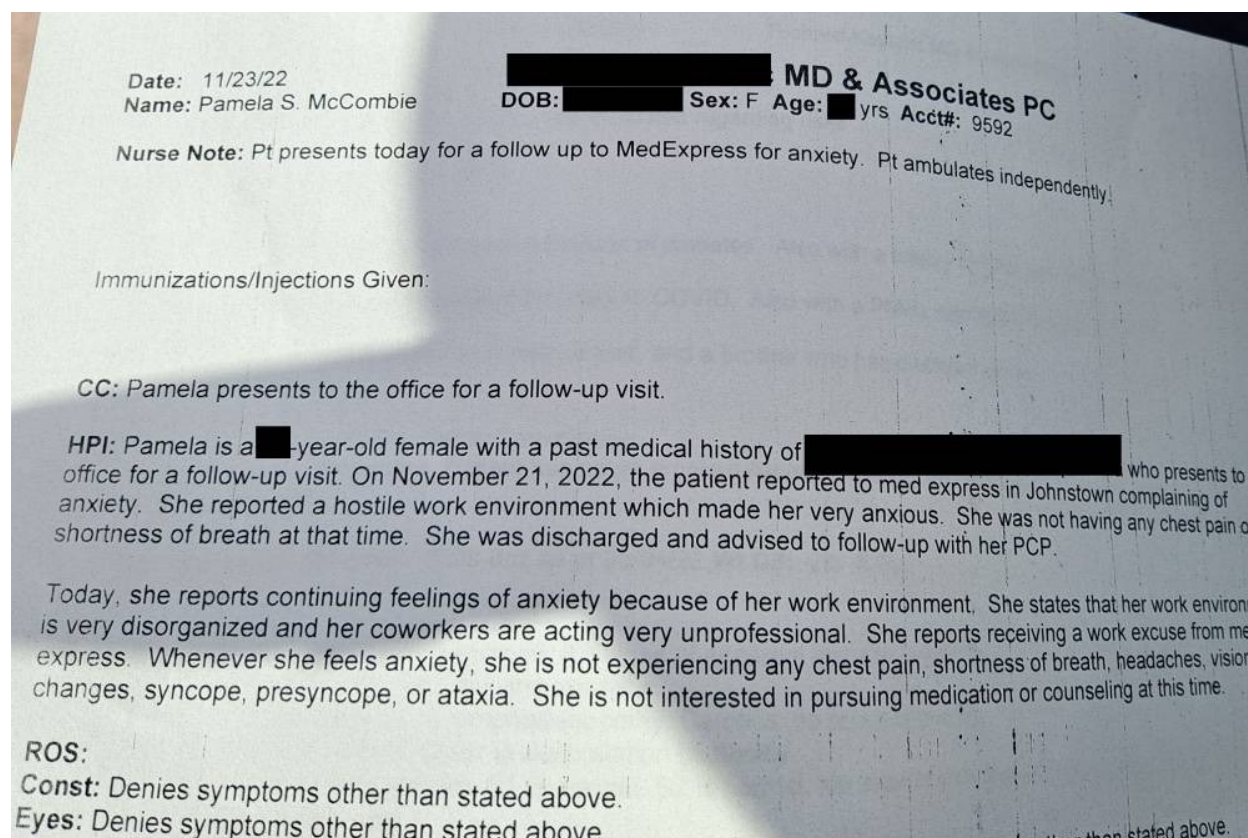
to the point that I just was so physically and mentally exhausted because there were days that we'd work —I would work sometimes from 6:00 a.m. until almost 11 o'clock at night, and a lot of times we wouldn't get breaks.”

McCombie had an incident so severe she sought medical help.

“I was driving up and I just got overwhelmingly hot and I felt like there was a weight sitting on my chest and I was shaking. So I came to a red light at the intersection and I stopped.”

“When I went in to see the doctor, I explained everything to her, what was going on, and I never went back to work to the Harrisburg office. After that day, I had to go see my [primary care provider], and then they had to sign me off on family medical leave for medical conditions related to my work atmosphere.”

She says the doctor she saw that day diagnosed her with a panic attack and attributed it to work. Even in her eighteen years of service at the regional dispatch center, it was a first of its kind panic attack for McCombie.



McCombie provided physician notes from a follow-up visit two days after her urgent care visit. The notes record that she “reported a hostile work environment which made her very anxious.” They also note she was not experiencing chest pain at the time of her original

urgent care visit — a slight discrepancy McCombie attributes to the symptoms having subsided while she waited to be seen.

McCombie and Kline — the two dispatchers who had already served about eighteen years each in their respective regional offices before centralization — say their premature exits were costly.

“I went from a nice paying job down to — I probably took a \$18 an hour pay cut,” when she realized she couldn’t continue in the toxic office, McCombie said.

“I knew I wanted to get to my 25 years...25 would’ve been for [state-covered] health insurance” in retirement, Kline said.

Prior accusations of toxic work culture

This January, [Broad + Liberty published the story](#) of two former employees — both female, but neither in dispatch — who say they were targeted and harassed out of their jobs, both also saying that health problems played a part.

The commission responded by denying the harassment allegations and complained that the two former employees were making after-the-fact allegations and suggested the pair had not maximized resources available to them when they were still employed.

In January 2024, a number of game wardens [criticized the commission](#) publicly. While most of the complaints had to do with relations between the union and PGC management, there were still accusations of retaliation.

“Our union has tried consistently over the last several years to negotiate with our human resources department and our agency’s management. We have been repeatedly ignored. Various members of our union have been lied to, threatened and retaliated against,” Lieutenant Game Warden Jason Amory said then.

An [investigation](#) by the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board looking into the union complaints said “it is more than evident that the PGC was searching for a pretextual reason to preclude” a certain officer from being the sole applicant for a job posting.

The PGC is a commission and not a department, therefore it operates somewhat out of the regular orbit of accountability of the General Assembly. Because its nine commissioners are appointed by the governor, *Broad + Liberty* requested comment from the Shapiro administration, pointing to the previous report from January and informing it about the allegations in this report.

The press office did not engage with the specifics.

“The Shapiro Administration is committed to ensuring safe, respectful workplaces across the Commonwealth,” the press office said. “It expects any allegations of misconduct to be reviewed promptly, thoroughly, and in accordance with established policies.”

As was the case with the original *Broad + Liberty* report of alleged harassment and retaliation at the PGC, the sources who commented for this story say they believe in the PGC’s mission, and say the majority of people who work there are professionals they respect.

“I love the agents. I love what the game wardens do. I love my job. I loved educating the public. It’s just the atmosphere is not fantastic,” Czech said. “I’m not trying to necessarily just take down the agency, but I love the game commission. I just think that that work environment needs to be addressed.”

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