

## Lawmaker wants to bolster harassment policy - Amendment would strengthen House ethics structure

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House Speaker Gene Chandler wants to strengthen the New Hampshire Legislature's ability to investigate and punish lawmakers accused of sexual harassment.

Chandler has suggested amending a bill, now before the House, to clearly define the procedures to be taken by the Legislative Ethics Committee if an accusation is raised against an elected state official.

Chandler's effort comes two months after a jury found House leaders guilty of failing to protect a State House secretary from unwanted sexual advances by a legislator. In his testimony in that case, Chandler said he had no authority to discipline House members. The changes he suggested yesterday would put that responsibility squarely on the Legislature's independent ethics committee.

"It has been a problem and something we need to address," Chandler told a House committee yesterday.

Chandler's proposed amendment offers a detailed definition of "sexual harassment," including verbal abuse, offensive flirtation, graphic comments about someone's body and unwelcome touching, among other offenses.

Chandler would also make private any proceedings on a sexual harassment charge brought against a lawmaker. But if the ethics panel determines the legislator has sexually harassed someone, those proceedings will be made public.

Rep. Shawn Jasper, chairman of the legislative ethics committee, co-sponsored Chandler's amendment. Speaking before the lawmakers yesterday, Jasper said, "None of the (ethics) committee (members) are enthused about taking on the added responsibility, but we understand it's a job that must be done."

The bill would apply only to elected officials, not to legislative employees. Their conduct is regulated by a separate code of behavior.

In February, a Merrimack County jury awarded Dorothy Pike, a former State House secretary, \$188,000 in back pay and damages, after determining that House leaders had failed to protect her from sexual harassment by former House member Ron "Tony" Giordano. The jury ordered the House to pay 55 percent of that amount and Giordano to pay the rest.

Pike was the first legislative employee to file sexual harassment claims against the House or a House member. She was in the audience during yesterday's House committee meeting, but she did not testify.

At the time of Pike's verdict, Chandler said he was "surprised and disappointed" by the jury's decision. The House is appealing the verdict.

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