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Deputy accuses Lancaster County Sheriff Mark Reese of sexual harassment



CHRISTOPHER PRATT | Staff Writer 1 hr ago



A Lancaster County deputy sheriff says she was subjected to “severe and pervasive sexual harassment” by her boss, Sheriff Mark Reese, and alleges other supervisors in the office disregarded her complaints.

The deputy sheriff, Jessica Padilla, alleges in a complaint filed with county commissioners Chairman Dennis Stuckey that Reese tried to coerce her into a sexual relationship beginning in 2014 and sent her lurid and pornographic emails that became “progressively graphic and harassing.”

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“Reese continued to apply pressure against Padilla to coerce her into a sexual relationship. Padilla refused, and requested a transfer to another department,” the complaint states.

Her request went unanswered, according to the complaint, and the deputy continued to be “subjected to Reese’s sexual overtures, his long gazes, with her full knowledge of the sexual encounters that Reese wants with her.”

Reese, who is married, has been on indefinite leave from his elected position since July 26 while the county conducts an investigation into the allegations, as LNP first reported last week. Padilla’s complaint was filed on July 11.

Reese did not return telephone and email messages seeking comment this week. At his Columbia-area home Tuesday, Reese referred most questions to his attorney, Andrew Bellwoar of Chester County.

In a written statement, Bellwoar said: “Sheriff Mark Reese is aware that a complaint has been made to the county. There is a process the county is going through pursuant to the law, and Sheriff Reese will fully cooperate in that process.

“The sheriff's commitment to the process includes voluntarily taking a short leave of absence so that the county can complete its work. Mark expects to return to the position to which the voters of Lancaster County elected him.”

The three county commissioners — Stuckey, Josh Parsons and Craig Lehman — declined to comment for this article and referred questions to the county’s chief clerk, Bob Still.

In a written response to LNP inquiries, Still wrote: “The commissioners take these allegations extremely seriously. As soon as we received notice of them the commissioners launched an internal investigation. The Sheriff is on leave and is not in the office. When the investigation is concluded we will have further comment.”

Padilla, 42, of Lancaster, is represented by the Philadelphia-based law firm Jacobson & Rooks. The firm provided a copy of Padilla’s complaint, which includes several pages of email transcripts, to LNP.

Padilla remains employed as a deputy sheriff by the county. Through her attorney, she declined a request to be interviewed for this article.

Franklin Rooks, a partner in the firm representing Padilla, said in an interview that she is seeking a financial settlement with the county but declined to specify a dollar amount. He said his client has met with county officials and ultimately wants a “harassment-free workplace” for herself and coworkers.

A ‘friend’ request escalates

Padilla began working as an intern in the sheriff’s office in about October 2014, according to the complaint. The government agency employs about 50 deputized officers and has a budget of \$5 million.

She alleges Reese began pursuing a relationship with her a short time later by making a friend request on Facebook.

Padilla initially ignored the request. But his secretary later asked her, according to the complaint, “Aren’t you going to accept the Sheriff’s friend request?”

Reese, using a personal email account, also began sending “innocuous” emails to Padilla’s personal email address about sporting events, according to the complaint.

Those emails became more graphic, the sheriff commenting on Padilla's clothing, her appearance and his penchant for observing her from a special spot in the office, the complaint said.

In January of 2015, Padilla alleges Reese wrote an email to her under the subject line "Hi:" "I must say, you look radiant today! Beautiful glow! Yes, your shoes and hosiery look great!!! I am not ignoring you in any way. I just don't want the girls to start talking, but wanted you to know I definitely noticed you! Lol! ;-)"

Later that month, Padilla alleges Reese wrote an email to her under the subject line "Bad:" "I just got a close look at your slacks. That design is really neat. Didn't notice cause they are dark. I know, I shouldn't be looking so close, sorry, that's why I titled this 'bad' cause I figured that's what I'd be called. Lol!"

Padilla alleges Reese sent her another email titled "PSS" in which he explained his attempts to keep his observance of her undetected by coworkers who might "stir the pot." "Why do you think I stand at 'my spot' to see you? Ha!" Reese wrote, according to Padilla's complaint.

During a brief exchange with a reporter outside his home Tuesday, Reese confirmed that the personal email account named in the complaint belonged to him. However, he said it has been inactive for "some time."

'Fear of losing her job'

Padilla told Reese she had a boyfriend and was in a committed relationship; she was afraid to say more "out of fear of losing her job," according to the complaint.

She alleges that Reese was undeterred and sent her an email in March 2015 under the subject line "Hot:" "I really wanted to reach over and rub your legs through those tight pants!! Now THAT would be misbehaving hon!!!"

Padilla alleges Reese's emails became harassing after she was no longer an intern and was officially hired as a deputy sheriff in April 2015.

On May 7 of that year, Reese allegedly sent her a lengthy pornographic email that featured a fictional deputy sheriff nicknamed "Baby." Like others, this email was included in the complaint given to the county commissioners and provided to LNP.

“Jess, I call her baby, just started a new job as a Deputy Sheriff. Her boss, me, was attracted to her from the first time he saw her, but she never knew it. Baby always dresses very nice and I have always taken notice. Baby also likes the way I dress too. She hasn't been issued a uniform yet.”

The email describes, in explicit detail, a fictional late-night sexual encounter in the sheriff's office that was almost disrupted by a security officer.

The complaint alleges others in the sheriff's office were aware of Reese's behavior. In July 2015, Reese wrote to Padilla that he had an upcoming meeting with the county human resources department to discuss a harassment issue, according to Padilla's complaint.

“Have no idea who, or against who? Could be me? Who knows??? I'll be off the rest of the week though. We have grandson for an extra week. I'm thinking about you all the time!!” Reese allegedly wrote.

After that email, Padilla alleges, she complained about Reese's behavior to a sergeant and deputy in the office, whom she believed then relayed the information to Chief Deputy Sheriff Charles Hamilton.

“Still,” her complaint states, “nothing changed.”

In October 2015, Padilla alleges, Reese wrote to her again: “Damn baby!!!! Loved that plaid dress and boots you were wearing at the baby shower! That is hot!!! Beautiful face and hot legs!!! Would've loved to see more of those legs!!!XO”

County power limited

Even if the county's investigation finds Reese is at fault, there is little it can do aside from recommend he resign from office. The sheriff is elected by voters and granted powers under the state constitution and the governor, not the county commissioners.

Bob Wollyung, executive director of the Pennsylvania Sheriffs' Association, said the only way a sheriff can be forcibly removed from office is "through impeachment, same as the governor."

Impeachment requires a two-thirds vote from the state Senate or conviction of “misbehavior in office, or of any infamous crime,” according to the county code.

Franklin Rooks, Padilla's attorney, said the firm provided a copy of the complaint to LNP in response to the county's public remarks about the case last week.

The sheriff's primary responsibility is to the court system. The office is responsible for providing security at the county administration building, servicing warrants and issuing permits to carry firearms.

Reese, a Republican, was re-elected to a four-year term in November; he is paid a salary of \$85,460, according to county records.

Reese, a former Lancaster city police officer who has worked in the sheriff's office since 1996, was known for arriving at work at 5:30 a.m. to get a jump-start on the day, according to newspaper archives.

"One of the reasons I come in so early," he told a reporter in 2005, "is so that I can leave at 5 p.m. and get home to my family."



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