

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

BYSTANDERS DEEPEN PROBLEMS OF NEW YORK GOVERNOR

“I never touched anyone inappropriately.”

There it is. That’s the line. That’s the difference between sexual harassment and perfectly acceptable behavior that might be misunderstood, at least in the mind of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

The once-popular, three-term governor is facing a barrage of harassment charges and calls to resign, from Democrats and Republicans alike.

Cuomo’s accusers include Charlotte Bennett, his former executive assistant. In an interview with Norah O’Donnell on the CBS Evening News, she described the governor as a “textbook abuser.” Bennett said that Cuomo wanted to sleep with her, although he never propositioned her. Instead, he told Bennett that he was lonely — and that she was “old enough” for him.

Bennett’s accusations came only a few days after another former administration aide, Lindsey Boylan, published an essay in which she detailed several years of uncomfortable interactions with the governor.

Just a few days later, a third

woman — who is not a former employee — described an unwanted advance from the governor at a wedding. Last weekend, two more women stepped forward with additional allegations of inappropriate behavior. And on Thursday, Cuomo was accused of groping an aide who was at the governor’s mansion.

Under immense public and political pressure, the governor’s office has asked the state attorney general, Letitia James, to appoint someone to conduct an outside investigation into the harassment claims. James selected a former federal prosecutor and an employment lawyer to run the investigation.

In his first public remarks after the earlier allegations came to light, Cuomo apologized but said that he would not resign. He asked his constituents to let the investigation play out. Cuomo continued with familiar words: “I never meant to hurt anyone or cause any pain. I’ve learned an important lesson. I will be better for the experience. But my intent doesn’t matter: If anybody was offended, I was wrong.”

Hoping to deflect, Cuomo then

said, “There are more senior women in (my) administration than probably any in history.” It’s an oft-used strategy in these situations, to make us think that someone who is supposedly pro-woman couldn’t possibly be a harasser.

Granted, Cuomo is an unabashed hugger and kisser. As his senior adviser Rich Azzopardi noted, reporters and photographers who cover the governor “have spent 14 years watching him kiss men and women and posing for pictures.” So, clearly, in Cuomo’s world, hugging and kissing strangers doesn’t cross the harassment line.

The governor’s alleged actions are puzzling when you consider that he’s the father of three daughters, ages 25 (twins) and 22. My own daughter is about the same age, so I find it creepy that Cuomo allegedly asked Bennett, 25, if age difference mattered in a relationship, saying he was fine with anyone over the age of 22.

Oddly, Cuomo has also signed laws that strengthen protections against discrimination and harassment under the New York State Human Rights Law, making them easier to prove.

Sexual misconduct allegations among politicians are as old as American history. The pattern persists: A man in power acts with impunity toward a woman, often his subordinate. And while the consequences are different for every woman involved, they often share feelings of fear, shame and pain.

In Cuomo’s case, there have been ample opportunities for course correction over the years. But it was easier to follow the path of least resistance. For Bennett, that meant being transferred to another department and a decision by aides not to investigate the matter any further. Somehow, Bennett’s “grooming” by the governor didn’t constitute harassment.

Certainly, it’s important to know what to do when someone clearly crosses the line. But the real key to protecting Bennett, Boylan and others is stopping that line from being crossed in the first place.

In the workplace, that means speaking up when we see or hear something that doesn’t seem right. Often, harassing behavior begins with microaggressions —

everyday slights, snubs and comments that communicate hostility to the person on the receiving end, even if intended to be harmless.

When we act as bystanders, choosing not to step in, we reinforce this behavior. Instead, we should act as “upstanders,” intervening in the moment or shortly after. Sometimes, just a simple conversation can make a difference, especially when a person is unaware that their remarks were troubling.

This takes moxie. We worry about jumping to conclusions. And we fear getting involved because of concerns about retaliation, hurting relationships or damaging a person’s reputation — all at play in the Cuomo situation.

Still, I can’t help but think: If only there had been just one upstander in the governor’s inner circle. Imagine all the misery that could have been avoided.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit ncrconline.com

TENT

FROM B1
to provide information about Medicare to those who came to the vaccination center. However, two days later, that changed. The staff noticed that many seniors were coming to the booth with questions about their appointments.

Instead of telling them to go home and try to make their appointment online they decided to find a way to help. They now resolve doubts on Medicare and the COVID vaccine.

They have found that many seniors had a family member help them make the first appointment, and they may have received information about the second dose in their email, but they are unaware of it.

“What we do here is take on the role of the grandchild, the niece, or the daughter,” Salas said. “If nothing is available, we put them on

the wait list and call them once there’s availability.”

Seniors also commonly arrive with their vaccination card that on the back shows a recommended date for the second appointment, but it does not mean that this is the actual date, since it still must be scheduled online, Salas said.

Questions are never-ending. At some point during the day, the line for queries or to make appointments at the booth is longer than for the vaccine itself.

The staff looks for as many folding chairs as possible and shaded space so the seniors can wait while respecting social distancing.

“Imagine, someone they’ve been told for a year, don’t go outside, don’t talk to anyone, don’t touch anyone, and suddenly they’re in a crowded line. For many this is the first time out of their home after months,” Salas said.

Jose de Jesus Velasco, 74, a San Diego resident, was



Pat Salas (left), president of SBHIS, an insurance agency focused on Medicare beneficiaries, helps a resident at the Vaccination Super Station in Chula Vista.

walking through the Chula Vista mall on his way to pay his cellphone bill. He learned

that nearby people were getting help in scheduling vaccine appointments. He did

not hesitate to line up.

He said he had already tried by phone but had not

found available appointments. He does not have access to the Internet at home.

“It gives me some comfort now that they’re going to help me here,” he said. “For me, even if they lent me a computer, I wouldn’t know how to use it.”

The orange booth is staffed with bilingual personnel and is regularly open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday. In the last few days, they have helped an average of 50 people per hour, Salas said.

Sometimes the wait can be long, so officials recommend to try first at home with the assistance of a family member. There is another SBHIS information booth at the Grossmont Center Super Station.

Salas said that they will continue to assist the senior community at these information booths until it is no longer needed.

alexandra.mendoza@suniontribune.com

WASTE

FROM B1
45,000 have green rolling carts required by the new state law. The rest either use their own 32-gallon trash cans, or they bundle green recycling together and wrap it in twine.

The city must buy enough green carts so that all 290,000 single-family home customers have one and it must extend green recycling service to the 89,000 customers who currently have none.

The state law also requires cities to collect green recycling once a week, forcing San Diego to double its existing recycling service, which is once every two weeks.

“We’re going to need more trucks, more contain-

ers, more drivers,” said Ken Prue, the city’s recycling program manager. “We’re in a planning phase now to identify all of our needs and necessary funding.”

Prue said the city, which now spends about \$34 million a year on trash service, will have to spend millions more. But he declined to provide a more specific estimate.

“It’s significant,” said Prue, adding that the process is complicated and time-consuming. “We definitely won’t be citywide by Jan. 1.”

The changes will also affect single-family homes in the city that are serviced by private haulers, not city trucks, because they are in gated areas or they are not on a public street.

Like single-family homes served by city trucks, they must start recycling yard

trimmings, non-hazardous wood waste, food scraps and food-soiled paper mixed with food on Jan. 1. Their private haulers will provide them with green rolling carts.

The changes are more complicated for multi-family housing — apartments and condominiums.

The city had been granting recycling exemptions to multifamily properties with fewer than five units or which had been generating less than 4 cubic yards per week of solid waste.

Last month, the city ended those exemptions and began requiring all multifamily properties to begin using blue bins and recycling bottles, cans and other non-organic recyclables.

The changes approved last month also require multifamily properties to im-

mediately begin recycling yard trimmings and non-hazardous wood waste, but there is an exemption for properties that generate less than half a cubic yard of organic waste per week.

In January, that exemption will go away and multifamily properties will be required to expand their green recycling efforts to include food scraps and food-soiled paper mixed with food.

The changes also affect businesses.

The new requirements adopted by the city last month require businesses to begin recycling all organic waste unless they generate less than half a cubic yard of organic waste per week. In January, that exemption will go away.

Prue said the city plans to compost the organic waste at the Miramar Greenery,

which will reduce the amount of methane that escapes into the atmosphere and accelerates climate change.

The methane produced by organic materials in landfills produces 80 times more greenhouse gas emissions than carbon dioxide, state officials say.

Some trash haulers, including EDCO, plan to use anaerobic digestion facilities to transform organic waste into natural gas. Prue said city officials have no plans to do that.

Instead the city will compost the organic waste into soil-type products, mulch or wood chips, Prue said.

Some private haulers also are providing customers with kitchen caddies, plastic devices that help people separate food and organic waste from trash in-

side their home and then carry it out to green containers later.

Prue said the city is evaluating caddies.

In addition to increased expenses for organic waste recycling, the city is facing financial challenges caused by China’s policy shift a few years ago away from buying recycled goods from the United States.

The city had been generating about \$4 million a year from selling recycled goods but now is spending between \$4 million and \$5 million a year processing those goods.

Prue said there is still a market for the goods, so the city doesn’t need to dump recyclables into the landfill with trash. But, he said, the financial shift is a big challenge.

david.garrick@suniontribune.com

CANDIDATES

FROM B1
While Democrats in the race recently called for a suite of police reforms, Contreras questioned whether racial bias is the central determinant in police use of force.

“There’s a culture issue, there’s a heart issue, there’s systemic racism, there’s a bias issue,” said Glass, who said she participated in racial justice protests last year. “We need to take a look at changing how our officers are being trained. We also need to talk about equity. Upper-income communities want more police and low-income communities are over-policed.”

Contreras said he shares concerns about discrimination but is wary of language or policies that assume minority communities are at odds with law enforcement.

“I think we should always have empathy for people who have suffered any injustice,” he said. “But at the same time I think we should be very conscious of the rhetoric of equity.... To embrace a certain part of the equity rhetoric would be to embrace a certain mentality that limits us and puts us in a position of being a victim of the system.”

He said he thinks homelessness is a more important factor than race in police interactions and defunding police departments would increase lawlessness and crime.

The Democratic con-

tenders said calls to defund police are really discussions about shifting spending priorities, to better address the range of social and medical emergencies that police now handle.

“I think we need to look at the variety of specialized situations that law enforcement are currently dispatched to and take those jobs away from law enforcement and reallocate them to the people who are actually trained professionals... homeless outreach workers, mental health professionals, social workers,” Parmely said. “We need to stop funneling everybody into the criminal justice situation.”

Crisis response teams should include “social workers and clinical therapists, to do intervention that’s culturally competent,” Munguia said.

When officers have abused or mistreated people they stop, they should lose their job and the ability to seek new positions with other agencies, several candidates argued.

“We need to make sure that there is a process of decertification,” Weber said, noting that doctors, teachers and other professionals hold licenses that can be revoked if they fail to follow professional standards.

“When you look at what I call rogue officers, they oftentimes have a pattern of this behavior and they can oftentimes go from police department to police department,” she said.

Munguia and Glass suggested establishing a state

database with records of police abuse complaints and findings, to prevent officers who resigned or were fired following misconduct from getting law enforcement jobs elsewhere.

Weber said she helped establish a citizens police oversight board in La Mesa but added that police accountability should start long before officers ever interact with the public.

Departments should review hiring and training processes to make sure the people they recruit will react calmly in urgent situations, she said. And they should consider increasing the length of training and raising the age limit for police recruits, she argued.

“You are holding a gun, which is a deadly weapon, so you need to make sure you have mature individuals,” Weber said.

Glass pointed out that most police interactions are routine encounters that don’t require aggressive action. Officers should be trained to deescalate conflicts before they become crises, she said.

“A lot of our officers show up like warriors, and we really need guardians,” Glass said.

The 79th District includes parts of Southeast San Diego, Bonita, Chula Vista, La Mesa, Lemon Grove and National City. The primary is April 6. The top two vote-getters will go through a runoff election June 8.

deborah.brennan@suniontribune.com

SMOLENS

FROM B1
Among families with children, those low- and middle-income households would get nearly three-quarters of the benefit.

“By contrast, nearly half of the TCJA’s 2018 tax cuts went to households in the top 5 percent of the income distribution (who made about \$308,000 that year),” the analysis says.

That shift comes amid increasing attention to the income gap in the United States. Much has been written about how billionaires saw their wealth grow during the pandemic, while huge numbers of people filed for unemployment benefits.

But the income disparity has occurred over decades.

The gap between America’s richest and poorest families more than doubled from 1989 to 2016, according to the Pew Research Center, while middle-class incomes have grown at a slower rate than upper-tier incomes over the past five decades.

Income inequality in the U.S. is the highest of all G-7 nations.

Sixty-one percent of Americans said there is too much economic inequality in the U.S., according to a Pew survey in September 2019. But like most everything else, partisans view it differently. Among Democrats and people leaning Democratic, 78 percent believe there’s too much. Just 41 percent of Republicans and GOP leaners agreed.

Newsom pushed state

legislators to include \$600 payments to low-income Californians as part of a \$7.6 billion recovery package he signed in February. During his State of the State address last week, he talked about addressing long-standing inequities that became more severe during the pandemic.

Democrats, who have run the state for a long time, own a lot of that.

This raises the question of whether Democratic takeovers in San Diego and Washington — if they last — guarantee long-term success in reducing inequities, despite all the money and action of today.

After Democrats gained a majority on the county Board of Supervisors for the first time in decades, they moved quickly in that direction. Supervisors brought back the defunct Human Relations Commission, gave more power to the county’s independent Citizen’s Law Enforcement Review Board and created an Office of Equity and Racial Justice.

Among other things, the board advanced a cannabis policy for unincorporated areas of the county that includes a “social equity program” involving who gets permits. The proposal by Fletcher and Supervisor Nora Vargas pointed out that “a disproportionate number of Black and Brown residents remain in jail for low-level drug offenses as a result of the failed War on Drugs.”

At City Hall, Democrat Gloria replaced termed-out Republican Kevin Faulconer and Democrats

expanded their council majority to 8-1. They have moved to establish a new Office of Race and Equity, an Environmental Justice Initiative focused on boosting health in poor areas, and are seeking to pave miles of dirt streets in less-affluent neighborhoods.

The city created a “climate equity fund,” starting with nearly \$5 million to build parks, plant trees and increase exercise options in low-income and ethnically diverse communities most affected by climate change, according to David Garrick of The San Diego Union-Tribune.

San Diego voters in November agreed to replace the city police review board with a stronger, independent Commission on Police Practices, a change in large part fueled by complaints about police use of force and disproportionate traffic stops of minorities.

Some of these policies have yet to take effect, so it will be a while before there are results to assess.

Whatever the outcome, the local effort to do better by underserved communities quickly has become institutionalized.

Tweet of the Week

Media to Jeremy Abbate (@MediaJerNYC), publisher of Scientific American.

“I asked my mom if she felt any side effects from her second vaccine shot today and she said ‘an acute appreciation for science.’”

michael.smolens@suniontribune.com