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# Alex Walters

[alex.walters@statenews.com](mailto:alex.walters@statenews.com)

(248) 979-5497

[LinkedIn](#) | [Twitter](#)

## WORK EXPERIENCE:

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| <b>The Chronicle of Higher Education, Reporting Intern</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Summer 2024         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wrote stories including dailies on sector trends, a state politics scoop, and a lengthy, magazine-style feature that was one of the paper's most read stories that year</li><li>• Learned to nationalize reporting with lucid explanations of why events in one place are important to readers everywhere</li><li>• Maintained an award-winning interactive legislation-tracker monitoring the progress and passage of state and federal bills affecting colleges' diversity, equity and inclusion efforts</li><li>• Selected by a panel of reporters and editors for an award and scholarship honoring outstanding work by an intern</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                     |
| <b>The State News, Various Reporting Roles</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Aug. 2022- Present  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wrote nearly 300 stories, consistently beating professional newspaper competitors in both daily breaking news coverage and ambitious enterprise stories</li><li>• Broke news that significantly changed the public's understanding of the issues and brought new ones to light, prompting changes to university policies, student and faculty advocacy, and a lawsuit against the university</li><li>• Filed hundreds of FOIA requests, wrote and researched dozens of appeals, designed an interactive FOIA generator for readers to file requests, and coordinated FOIA lawsuits against the university, working with attorneys on the reasoning behind complaints and various motions</li><li>• Hosted a weekly news podcast that translated web content into enjoyable audio, either through Q&amp;A segments with the reporters or by rewriting stories into a easily understood spoken format</li></ul> |                     |
| <b>Capital News Service, Correspondent</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Jan. 2024- May 2024 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wrote 1-2 stories a week for a politics wire service published in over 30 Michigan publications, including event coverage, political features, and enterprise stories about policy</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                     |

## EDUCATION:

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- |                                                                                     |                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Michigan State University – James Madison College, East Lansing, MI</b>          | May 2026 (expected) |
| <b>GPA:</b> 3.8                                                                     |                     |
| <b>Majors:</b> Social Relations and Policy, Journalism <b>Minor:</b> Jewish Studies |                     |

## AWARDS:

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- |                                                                         |            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Student Journalism Award, National Education Writers Association</b> | May 2024   |
| <b>College Writer of the Year, Michigan Press Association</b>           | April 2024 |
| <b>Investigative Reporting, Hearst Journalism Awards</b>                | May 2024   |
| <b>Best News Story, Associated College Press</b>                        | Aug. 2024  |
| <b>Best Sports Story, Associated College Press</b>                      | Jan. 2024  |

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[msu](#)

# Feds investigate Olin assault allegations

An ongoing Department of Education investigation has Michigan State defending its handling of sexual assault allegations at the campus clinic

[Alex Walters](#)

November 22, 2024 | 2:38pm EST

Content warning: This article contains descriptions of sexual violence. The National Sexual Assault Hotline can be reached at 800-656-HOPE (4673).

For years, Michigan State University has insisted that its handling of sexual abuse claims has greatly improved since the Larry Nassar scandal.

The Department of Education seemingly isn’t so convinced.

The federal overseer, tasked with ensuring gender equity on college campuses, is investigating MSU for allegedly mishandling reports of sexual assault by a practitioner at its campus clinic and discriminating against one of the women who reported him.

The probe puts the university in an especially uncomfortable position — once again defending itself amid allegations of sexual misconduct by one of its healthcare providers.

Cases of sexual violence under the guise of medical treatment are difficult for any institution to navigate, experts told The State News. A power imbalance governs every interaction between providers and patients, and it can be extremely hard to decisively say where medicine ended and abuse began.

The issue is especially thorny for MSU, an institution that was widely lambasted for mishandling claims of sexual abuse by Nassar, its now-disgraced former doctor who assaulted hundreds of patients at his campus office.

Critics argued Nassar was allowed to continue his exploits because of failings in MSU's processes, which either ignored accusations or cleared Nassar of wrongdoing.

In the years since, the university has attempted to convince skeptics that Nassar was an isolated issue that can't happen again.

But the allegations being considered in the new federal investigation, and others uncovered by The State News, complicate that narrative.

The State News [first reported](#) the existence of the federal probe more than a year ago, using heavily redacted documents that only revealed that an investigation existed.

Now, the MSU graduate who filed the complaint has shared her story and hundreds of pages of documents with The State News, shedding light on the MSU investigation at the heart of the department's inquiry. Her account is also supported by additional reporting and dozens of other documents obtained through public records requests.

Why share so much, especially as the federal government's investigation is still ongoing?

Because if she had known from the beginning what MSU's investigation would be like, she may have never reported to the university at all.

"My goal with all this is so that people have more information about the process and can make a more informed decision," said the woman, who The State News is only identifying by her middle name, Elizabeth.

"Because, looking back now, I certainly didn't have that going in."



Olin Memorial Health Center on Nov. 11, 2024.

— Photo by [Campbell Berg](#) | The State News

## Making the allegation

Almost three years ago, when Elizabeth first reported to MSU, she saw things differently.

She had followed the news about past sexual violence issues at the university; she had heard MSU's official line on its ever-improving Title IX system; and Elizabeth believed that her studies — which related to the sorts of issues and processes in Title IX cases — would prepare her for the process.

So in February 2022, when Elizabeth was a student, she filed a report with MSU's Office of Institutional Equity, which conducts Title IX investigations. She told them that she had been assaulted during an appointment days earlier at the university's campus clinic, the Olin Health Center.

The first step was creating a formal complaint.

Elizabeth was interviewed by a university Title IX investigator. Then, that person turned the interview into a written, third-person narrative. She and the investigator then went back and forth on the language until Elizabeth felt comfortable signing the document.

Disagreements between Elizabeth and the investigator over what details to include were "the first real frustration" in the lengthy process, she said.

The State News reviewed a copy of the formal complaint.

It said that the way the practitioner touched Elizabeth "felt intentionally affectionate, not treatment-oriented," leading her to question whether it was appropriate. It also described a moment of arousal she experienced, which further convinced her that something was amiss. And, it detailed how she struggled to get up off the table during the alleged assault.

It also detailed a series of comments made by the practitioner that left her feeling uncomfortable. At one point, as his arms were wrapped around Elizabeth, the practitioner said, "Hey look, you are getting your hugs for the weekend," the complaint said.

When she mistakenly thought a treatment was over and began to stand up, he told her, "You can get up when I say you can get up." Then, when the appointment was actually over, he said, "OK, do your exercises or else I will have to do that again."

Elizabeth’s other statements to investigators described the experience as “humiliating,” saying she had to work through a sense of shame surrounding the arousal, eventually coming to terms with the fact that it was “only a response to the physical sensation, not any signal of desire or acceptance.”

They also included details from the weeks after the appointment, saying she struggled to sleep and focus in school, suffered panic attacks and had a visceral flashback to the appointment.

Elizabeth signed her formal complaint in March, officially starting the investigation. The Title IX office’s next step was alerting the practitioner and soliciting his response.

In a written statement, he denied the allegations, writing that it "was a normal treatment session."

The practitioner said he did not recall details of the appointment, but that if what Elizabeth alleged did occur, it could all be explained away. He said that the maneuvers she described could have been part of legitimate medical treatment, and the comments could have been a manifestation of his effort to "have a casual and light-hearted treatment session."

He also wrote that, in his decades-long career, he "had never before ... been accused of behaving inappropriately toward a patient."

That wasn’t true, as police reports show he was accused of assaulting another patient two years before, and had used the same defense.

The State News is not identifying the practitioner or his medical discipline because he has not been found responsible for misconduct in university investigations or charged with a crime. Reached by email, he told The State News that "this was a very traumatic time in my life and so (I) will not be adding further comments."

Get in touch

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MSU seeks an expert

After receiving the statements from both parties, MSU’s investigator chose to ask an expert in the practitioner’s medical discipline to write a report interpreting them.

The use of experts in an accused doctor’s field became a point of contention for MSU amid the widespread criticism of its handling of Nassar’s serial abuse.

The university infamously cleared Nassar of wrongdoing in a 2014 Title IX investigation relying on statements from experts in his field who said that everything Nassar did was part of legitimate medical treatment. Those experts, however, were colleagues of Nassar.

In Elizabeth's case, MSU used an expert outside the university. The expert's report endorsed the practitioner's defense.

The expert's report said the conduct described could all be part of normal medical treatment. It noted that the practitioner could have communicated more clearly so that Elizabeth would "accept the treatment from the (practitioner) without question."

The report also minimized the comments that made Elizabeth uncomfortable. The expert questioned her for reporting them to MSU because she "did not voice any concern to (the practitioner)" in the moment.

There is also dispute over the expert's discussion of Elizabeth's clothing being partially removed.

Elizabeth's formal complaint said that the practitioner "stated it was easier if he could roll down her pants a bit." The complaint then moved on to describing the rest of the appointment, and doesn't mention the pants again.

The practitioner also briefly addresses that in his statement, saying he did not remember her pants being lowered. He goes on to say that if her pants were rolled down, it would have been part of his treatment.

The expert, however, distorted this discussion, making an assertion that Elizabeth rolled down her own pants and thus consented to later actions she alleged.

The report said: "Since claimant rolled her own pants down, the respondent likely assumed that the claimant was giving permission" to perform one of the ensuing treatments that made Elizabeth uncomfortable.

Experts in Title IX cases like Elizabeth's don't have to follow the same rules of evidence that govern expert testimony in criminal proceedings, said Nicole Bedera, a sociologist who studied Title IX investigations for her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Michigan.

If a case like this occurred in a courtroom, for example, an expert would only be able to speak to the actual medical questions, Bedera said. But in Title IX cases, experts sometimes make sweeping judgments about informed consent or sexual violence, despite lacking true expertise or experience in those concepts, said Bedera, who recently published a book about Title IX investigations.



Michigan State University's Student Services Building on. Nov. 11, 2024.

— Photo by [Campbell Berg](#) | The State News

## Dispute about medical records

MSU also sought to add Elizabeth's unrelated medical records to the pool of evidence being used to evaluate the case, bringing further disputes.

When Elizabeth signed a HIPAA release allowing medical documents to be included in the case file, she thought it would only be the notes on the appointment in question, she said.

Instead, MSU added her entire medical file, including notes on conditions and treatments unrelated to the matter at hand.

That included unrelated medical information which Elizabeth believed could prejudice the investigator and eventual resolution officer against her.

Elizabeth protested, and MSU eventually redacted the unrelated information in the medical file.

It's common for universities to attempt to "cloud" investigations with lengthy additions of non-essential evidence, said Bedera. In cases she studied for her book, Bedera notes that investigators muddled issues and created needless contention.

## A grueling hearing

At the end of the evidence-gathering phase of the process, an MSU investigator was responsible for deciding how the case should move forward.

In Elizabeth's case, the investigator concluded that, if true, what she alleged would fall under the university's definitions of sexual harassment and non-consensual sexual contact.

But the investigator decided that Elizabeth's "credibility is at issue," so further review was required.

The investigator recommended that a live hearing be conducted before an outside resolution officer was asked to make the final judgment.

Such hearings seek to replicate parts of criminal legal proceedings, with testimony of various witnesses and each party being cross-examined.

They are a core component of the first Trump administration's controversial Title IX rules, which sought to increase protections for those accused. The rules, [announced](#) in 2020, added a requirement of live hearings and cross-examinations.

That mandate was commended by some, who view hearings as an important due process protection for the accused, but [criticized](#) by others who say live hearings [retraumatize survivors](#) and [greatly delay](#) even simple cases.

In new rules [announced](#) earlier this year, the Biden administration got rid of the live hearing requirement, allowing colleges to choose when and whether to use them.

MSU has not dropped its live hearing requirement because of [legal challenges](#) to Biden's new rules brought by Republican state officials, said spokesperson Emily Guerrant.

It's unclear if Trump will bring back the live hearing requirement during his second term. His transition team did not respond to a request for comment, and his official platform says only that he will "reverse Biden's radical rewrite of Title IX" to "end left-wing gender insanity."

At Elizabeth's live hearing, she was questioned for over three hours.

Throughout the questioning, Elizabeth's adviser voiced concerns about the lengthy, aggressive questioning via Microsoft Teams Messages.

"This is not how we treat individuals in this process," Elizabeth's adviser said in one of the messages, which were included in the case file. "[T]his is a concern going forward."

In the messages, she noted that the practitioner's adviser was being "highly antagonistic," making "eye rolls after almost every question" and negative comments when Elizabeth opted not to answer certain probing questions.

Despite her adviser's concerns, the hearing officer allowed the abrasive questioning to continue.

"I felt like I was in the room with two additional bullies," Elizabeth said of the hearing officer and practitioner's adviser. "These lawyers come in and treat it like a court hearing."

When the hearing officer questioned her for 82 minutes, Elizabeth said she asked herself: "Is she just unprepared, or trying to get back at me?"

"I wondered if it was vindictive," she said.

The practitioner was also questioned at the hearing, though not for as long. During his portion, he repeated his defense: He did not recall details of the appointment but believes everything described was part of legitimate treatment.

The hearing also included testimony from another Olin employee who was working nearby during Elizabeth's appointment. That person said they did not remember anything concerning, but was busy with other patients and thus "could not have seen or heard every interaction" between Elizabeth and the practitioner.



Michigan State University's Student Services Building on. Nov. 11, 2024.

— Photo by [Campbell Berg](#) | The State News

## MSU's decision

After the hearing, a decision in Elizabeth's case was made by a resolution officer, someone outside the university who reviews all the evidence, watches the hearing, and then decides if the accused is found responsible for the conduct. Elizabeth's case was handled by Laura G. Anthony, a Columbus, Ohio attorney.

Anthony concluded there was not evidence to support a finding that the practitioner engaged in non-consensual touching, because Elizabeth was not credible, she said.

A "credibility determination" conducted by Anthony calls Elizabeth's account "inconsistent," because she included certain details in her later statements to investigators and during the hearing that weren't in her initial formal complaint.

That practice — assessing the credibility of a claimant by comparing their various statements to investigators, made months apart — is a subject of controversy. Experts in trauma psychology have [argued](#) that such judgments are unscientific and ignore what's understood about the different ways traumatic memories are stored and retrieved.

The credibility determination also took issue with some of the material of Elizabeth's retelling itself. Take, for example, Elizabeth's claim that she moaned and struggled to get off the table. Anthony writes that it would be impossible for that to have happened without someone else noticing, despite the one witness saying they were with another patient and not paying attention.

The practitioner, conversely, is credible, according to Anthony. She said he was "consistent internally and externally," with his repetition that he didn't remember the appointment and wouldn't do what was alleged.

The decision also disputes Elizabeth's allegation that the practitioner engaged in sexual harassment with the comments that made her uncomfortable. Anthony writes that it is possible Elizabeth found the comments "subjectively offensive," but "an objective person would not be offended by these comments."

## **Elizabeth appeals**

Elizabeth appealed Anthony's decision to a second resolution officer, a step allowed by MSU's Title IX policy and offered to claimants and respondents.

In her appeal, she questioned the credibility assessment.

The practitioner said in the hearing that he "saw 7-10 patients a day and did not have a direct recollection of the specific instances." How then, Elizabeth argued, could his account be credible?

She also pointed out that the witness — who supposedly supported the practitioner's account — stressed in the hearing that they did not have a direct recollection.

The appeal also takes issue with the hours-long, aggressive questioning at the hearing. The ordeal was "not trauma-informed to such a degree that was prejudicial against the Claimant for testifying."

Elizabeth's appeal was reviewed by Aislinn Sapp, an MSU employee tasked with making those final decisions. She denied it.

Sapp's December 2022 decision acknowledges many of Elizabeth's concerns, but suggests they are broader issues than can be addressed in an individual appeal.

A case can be overturned on appeal if there was a misapplication of MSU's policies; Elizabeth's appeal, however, was criticizing the policies themselves, Sapp argued.

With the hearing, for example, Sapp writes that she "agrees that the total length of time spent questioning (Elizabeth) is of concern," but doesn't see a misapplication of policy or anything that would have changed the decision.

"There is nothing in the policy or the hearing procedures that expressly requires a hearing to be trauma-informed," Sapp wrote.

The admission undercuts MSU's recent attempts to convince critics that its investigations are conducted in ways that won't further hurt or retraumatize survivors. The [training](#) used by Title IX staff describes investigations as "trauma-informed," and the office's most recent [annual report](#) says that it "strives to conduct (investigations) in a trauma-informed manner."

Guerrant, the MSU spokesperson, said that Sapp was making a "factual statement" about the hearing policy, which did not capture the university's overall "philosophy and approach."

"Recognizing the trauma of those impacted by these situations and promoting an environment of healing can still exist without a formal policy," she said in an emailed statement.

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Sapp’s decision similarly rejects the appeal’s issues with the credibility assessment. Elizabeth may have objections with the reasoning in the decision, but MSU’s policies give resolution officers "broad discretion" to determine what evidence is relevant and what weight it’s given, Sapp argues.

With that, MSU’s decision was set: The practitioner was not found responsible for either the sexual harassment or non-consensual sexual touching.

The case was then referred to MSU’s Board of Trustees for certification, a formal attestation that university leaders are aware of reported sexual misconduct by employees. The process is required by state laws created in reaction to the Nassar case. In March 2023, then-trustee, now-chair Dan Kelly certified Elizabeth’s case, according to emails obtained through public records requests.

**'I was being treated as a tool'**

For Elizabeth, the depth of the failings of the Title IX process wasn't entirely clear until she reported the same incident to MSU’s police department and had a vastly more positive experience.

Historically, survivors of sexual violence have feared reporting to police. Law enforcement agencies often mishandle cases or retraumatize survivors. Title IX investigations are sometimes advertised as less stressful and more accommodating of survivors.

The two systems also operate under different burdens of proof. In the criminal system, offenses must be proven "beyond a reasonable doubt." In Title IX, offenses only need to be proven to have "more likely than not" occurred.

But Elizabeth’s experience didn’t square with that conventional knowledge. Though the end result was the same, she said reporting to law enforcement was far less stressful than MSU’s Title IX process.

With the police, all she had to do was report what happened. Then, a trained detective did the investigating.

With MSU’s process, Elizabeth had to not only report what happened, but craft the formal statements describing it, collect the relevant evidence and argue her case. She had an adviser, but she knew it would all stop if she didn’t persist. It felt like the onus was all on her to solve the issue, she said.

Certain people in MSU’s process seemed interested in creating accountability for perpetrators, like a caring adviser or dedicated support person, she said. But, Elizabeth said it felt like it was on her to actually do that.

Sometimes, she thought about it as an issue of "cost and benefit," she said. Universities may want to remove employees who victimize others, but survivors are bearing the cost. They are retraumatized and burdened by a grueling process to make that happen, Elizabeth said.

"They need you in order to get these people out," she said. "Sometimes I felt like I was being treated as a tool."

If she could do it all again, Elizabeth said she would have first reported to police and may have skipped MSU’s Title IX process.

She’s not alone, said Bedera, the sociologist who studies campus sexual violence.

"Title IX investigation" is largely a misnomer, Bedera said, because it’s the involved parties who collect the evidence and build the cases — not the university.

The "investigator" is actually more of an "evidence receiver and organizer," she said.

"They really put it all on the claimant," Bedera said. "Schools say, 'Bring it to me the right way, and put it directly in front of me.' You have to do all the work, and if you don’t don’t it correctly, they’ll pretend nothing happened."

Some have caught on to this and began utilizing the differing systems to their advantage.

In a case Bedera studied for a book, a survivor chose to first report to police and allow a detective to conduct an investigation. Then, she reported to the university using the evidence collected by police, easing the burden on her in the Title IX process.

In a purely pragmatic sense, Bedera said it may be a keen way to get some of the benefits of both systems. But, she said it demonstrates how broken universities’ methods may be.

"(That survivor) said that the university process seemed worse than being interrogated by a white male police officer," Bedera said. "And to her, that’s a real indictment."



Michigan State University Police Department on Nov. 11, 2024.

— Photo by [Campbell Berg](#) | The State News

**Previous allegations from another patient**

It appears that the posture Bedera describes played out in other allegations against the same practitioner.

Two years before Elizabeth's incident, another patient made similar accusations, but chose to only cooperate with a police investigation, declining invitations from the university to participate in the Title IX process.

A police report shows that in January of 2020, an MSU student told officers that she believed she was sexually assaulted by the practitioner during an appointment at Olin.

The student told police she began to question the treatment as she noticed that the practitioner would vary the forcefulness and nature of his touch depending on if others were in the room, according to a copy of the police report obtained through a public records request.

"I know how it is," the victim told police. "He'll try and touch me in certain ways, and look at me provocatively when we're alone, but the moment an adult comes ... he'll act professional."

She began to feel relief each time someone walked by, and then dread as she realized, "Oh my God, this is happening again," when the other person left, according to the police report.

The police interviewed the practitioner — who denied the characterization — and then hired an outside expert to evaluate the allegations.

The expert's eventual report concluded that the practitioner's actions could be part of legitimate medical treatment, but that something was amiss if a patient was left feeling like the practitioner was getting sexual gratification from it. He theorized that the cause was a "miscommunication failure," according to a copy of his report included in the police file.

The police sought input from the same expert years later in Elizabeth's case. In that matter, he expressed deeper doubts.

What happened could have been another communication failure, the expert wrote of Elizabeth's case. But, he concluded that he could not "rule out possible inappropriate behavior or actions" because of Elizabeth's description of arousal.

"The sensual response by the patient is not fully explained to this consultant's satisfaction," he wrote in his report, which The State News obtained through a public records request.

The police expert also differs from MSU's in his discussion of Elizabeth's clothing.

MSU's expert asserted that Elizabeth consented to parts of the treatment because of the seemingly unsupported assertion that she lowered her pants when asked. The police's expert, conversely, says that there wasn't a medical reason to lower her pants at all, according to his review of the statements and the medical record of the appointment.

Both the 2020 police investigation and Elizabeth's case were forwarded to the Ingham County prosecutor for charges. The requests were ultimately "denied because there was insufficient evidence to pursue criminal charges," prosecutor John Dewane said in an email to The State News.

The 2020 case never went through the Title IX process. The university opened an investigation when the patient made a report to police, but closed it because the accuser did not want to participate, according to documents obtained through public records requests. It's possible for MSU to carry out a

Title IX investigation without an accuser's participation, but it's rare and can be difficult.

Though the university didn't carry out a Title IX investigation, the report did eventually trigger information-sharing within MSU's administration thanks to a new state law.

The law passed in the wake of the Nassar scandal requires a university's Title IX staff to notify leaders when an employee is accused of sexual misconduct more than once.

So, MSU's Board of Trustees and its then-president, Samuel Stanley, were made aware of the cases against the practitioner in May 2022, according to emails obtained through public records requests.

It's unclear if that information was discussed by the board and Stanley at the time. Guerrant, the spokesperson, said she is "not aware if there was any discussion."

During the Title IX process, Elizabeth wasn't told that the board and president were alerted about her case, she said, or that a trustee would certify the final decision. She only found out when The State News asked her about it.

Elizabeth said it made her think about a series of [victim-blaming texts](#) exchanged by former trustee Pat O'Keefe and current trustee Rema Vassar which were published in news reports last year.

"I'm cringing, thinking about the text messages," she said. "What did they say about me? I don't even want to know."

## Feds examine MSU

In September of 2022, as Elizabeth awaited a hearing and decision in her Title IX case, she felt "the weight of the world on (her) shoulders." So, she filed a complaint with the federal Department of Education, hoping it would look into MSU's handling of her case.

Soon after MSU's decision, the university received a letter from the department's Office for Civil Rights. It said the department planned to investigate MSU for possibly mishandling the allegations against the practitioner, and potentially engaging in disability discrimination with the errant inclusion of Elizabeth's unrelated medical records.

The letter said the department was also investigating further allegations that Elizabeth's education at MSU was hindered in retaliation for her reporting of the practitioner. Elizabeth declined to speak in detail about that issue because it was within her degree program and could reveal her identity.

The federal investigation represents an eventful turn in Elizabeth's case, but isn't altogether unusual.

Universities like MSU are empowered to investigate and discipline issues of sexual violence under Title IX. The federal department's investigations act as a sort of check to that power, evaluating the ways that colleges conduct investigations when parties voice concerns.

In the last decade, MSU has entered into two major resolution agreements with the department. Those deals are one way the department's investigations can end, with universities agreeing to lists of required reforms.

In 2015, the university [agreed](#) to expand its Title IX office and improve efficiency after the department [found](#) that MSU failed to inform students of their rights under the statute and moved egregiously slow when investigating cases.

In 2019, MSU agreed to pay a \$4.5 million fine and create new information sharing policies after a department investigation found that the university repeatedly ignored reports of Nassar's abuse and failed to properly investigate the ones it considered. MSU is still working to adopt those recommendations and, earlier this year, the university paid another nearly \$3 million fine for failing to follow through on some of them.

Other department investigations into MSU have ended with more straightforward findings against the university or with a dismissal of the complaint altogether, said Guerrant, the MSU spokesperson.

Elizabeth's case is one of seven complaints about MSU's handling of Title IX that the department is currently investigating. Guerrant said the university "continue(s) to comply and cooperate with each of them."

Such investigations are often quite broad. The department doesn't necessarily investigate, for example, individual accusations that someone committed sexual misconduct. Rather, they tend to look at how an institution's investigative practices or systemic issues allowed abuse to occur.

Their inquiries may start with a single case, but attempt to find patterns and practices that violate various civil rights rules. The Office for Civil Rights' most recent annual report describes various ways that an investigation into one case can widen to examine broader institutional problems.

"Where there is a problem with one student, that may be an indicator that there is a problem with the way that the (institution) handled these kinds of" issues in general, said one attorney quoted in the report.

### **A troubling trend**

That broad lens puts MSU in an especially uncomfortable position with Elizabeth's case — forced to once again defend itself amid allegations of sexual misconduct by a university healthcare provider.

Those cases are difficult for any institution.

A deep power imbalance makes the medical field ripe for abuse. Patients sometimes go along with things that make them uncomfortable "because there is a sense of power and authority from someone in a medical setting," said Sheridan Miyamoto, a professor at Penn State University who researches sexual violence in healthcare.

"They don't always know where the line is blurred, only that something doesn't feel right," she said.

Investigating those cases then presents challenges that aren't there in other sexual violence cases. Much of medicine is inherently intimate, said J. Wesley Boyd, director of education at Harvard Medical School's Center for Bioethics. Even the best investigative processes can struggle to determine where medicine ends and abuse begins.

"There's no other setting where a stranger is going to ask you to disrobe and be able to put their hands on you, and it's considered absolutely appropriate," Boyd said. "Much of what happens in medical settings would be completely inappropriate outside of them."

"If you have predatory doctors, they exploit that," said Boyd, who has treated abusive doctors as a psychiatrist and acted as an expert witness in medical malpractice lawsuits.

MSU has tried to say Nassar was one example of that troubling trend, an outlier that can't happen again. But Nassar is by no means the only MSU healthcare provider accused of sexual misconduct in recent years. In fact, there are at least five reported cases.

There is the practitioner in Elizabeth's case; a university physical therapist was accused of sexually assaulting a patient in a 2023 lawsuit; and, an MSU medical resident was convicted of sexually assaulting patients in 2019.

The State News also found allegations of sexual assault by two other current MSU doctors. One was accused of groping two separate patients in 2017 and 2018, according to police reports and emails obtained through public records requests. The other was accused of assaulting a patient while working at a local hospital in a 2017 civil lawsuit.

It's unclear what is being examined in the department's current investigation of MSU. The State News obtained its case file through a public records request, but the department completely redacted the vast majority of the pages. The few pages that were unredacted or partially redacted were mostly cover pages and lengthy email signatures, lacking any significant information.

The department does not comment on open investigations, a spokesperson told The State News.

"Several factors impact how long it may take to resolve a complaint that is opened for investigation, including resource constraints as well as, for example, school responsiveness to document requests, witness availability, and volume of documents to review," the spokesperson said in a written statement.

The recent Office for Civil Rights report suggests that the department's investigators are woefully overwhelmed, with a skyrocketing number of cases and stagnate staffing.

It's also unclear how the office or its current investigations will be affected by Trump's plan to "close the Department of Education." Project 2025, a controversial political playbook written by former Trump administration officials, suggests preserving the office, but making it part of the Department of Justice.



Olin Memorial Health Center on Nov. 11, 2024.

— Photo by [Campbell Berg](#) | The State News

## Elizabeth wants change

Whatever the outcome, Elizabeth said she hopes MSU will reflect on her experience and further reform its processes. With or without prompting from the department, she said the university has work to do before "no one has to be afraid to see a doctor on that campus."

MSU largely declined to comment on Elizabeth's assertions. Guerrant, the spokesperson, did partially answer a list of written questions from The State News in an emailed statement.

Broadly, she said that "our goal in all investigations and situations is to treat everyone involved with respect and care."

In the years since the February 2022 appointment, Elizabeth said she's "had to do a lot to deal with the effects of what he did." By telling her story publicly and making her demands known, Elizabeth hopes MSU will be forced to do the same.

"I had to get better," she said. "Now, it's the university's choice whether they want to do the same thing for themselves."

One step would be funding academic research of the unique issue of sexual misconduct amidst medicine, Elizabeth suggested. There is a growing body of studies examining the problem. Making more of them possible would "show that the university is taking some ownership," she said.

In recent years, MSU has made major investments in scholarship of "health equity," with the new [Charles Stewart Mott Department of Public Health](#) in Flint and the recent [inaugural MSU Health Equity Symposium](#). Those both focused on health equity along racial and geographic lines, but Elizabeth

suggested that future work focused on eliminating sexual violence in healthcare could be a part of the broader mission.

Another suggestion: MSU should simply be more upfront about what Title IX investigations entail, Elizabeth said.

Even if the eventual outcome was the same, Elizabeth said her experience could have been improved if she knew from the start about the long wait times, burdensome evidence gathering, grueling hearing process and multiple times she would be made to rehash each traumatic detail of her allegations.

"Nothing can prepare you for this," she said.

MSU advertises its Title IX office as much improved since the days of Nassar. It calls the office "trauma informed." But, as the university equity review officer wrote in the decision in Elizabeth’s case, the policies themselves don’t always require that.

Elizabeth said she hopes that her choice to publicly detail her interactions with the university will help others make more informed choices about reporting.

"I’m not looking to be like the standard bearer of this issue," Elizabeth said. "I don’t want to hold this mantle ever again."

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Is there something more we should know? Or another story we should tell?

Reach the reporter at [Alex.Walters@statenews.com](mailto:Alex.Walters@statenews.com) or (248) 979-5497

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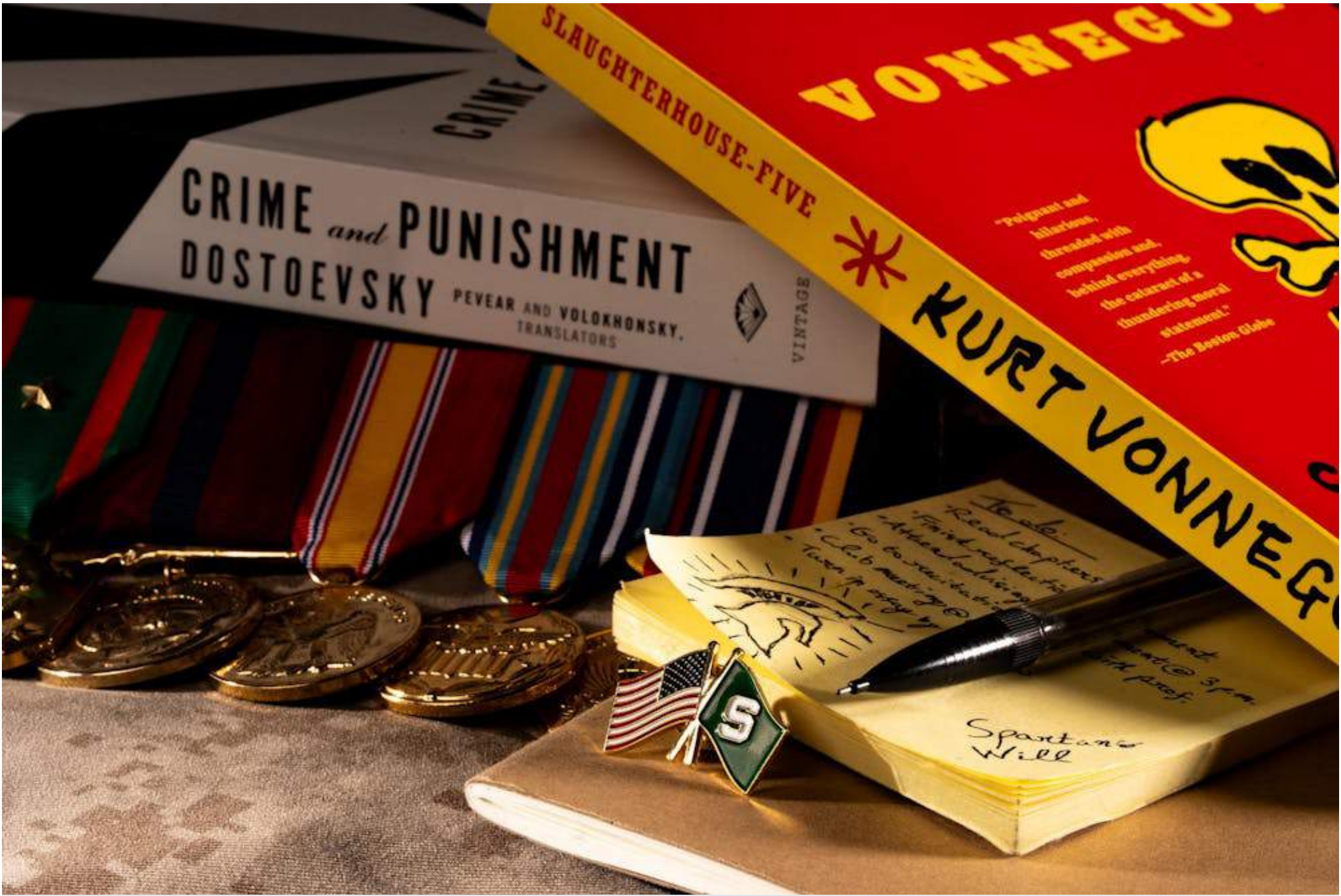
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# Bottleneck delays payments to military students

They earned G.I. Bill funding, but say MSU officials aren’t ‘holding up their end of the contract’

[Alex Walters](#)

April 21, 2025 | 12:32pm EDT

Military recruiters often make a simple pitch: enlist, serve, then college is free. It's a well worn deal. First established in 1944 under the G.I. Bill, Congress and the U.S. Supreme Court have repeatedly expanded the benefit as nearly 1 million veterans and dependents have used the funds, sending billions in revenue to colleges.

But at Michigan State University, the exchange isn’t so simple. University-employed middlemen stand between students and the federal funds they’re entitled to.

A shortage of them has led to persistent delays. MSU lags far behind federal recommendations, with just two employees tasked with certifying payments for more than a thousand students.

In meetings with administrators, responses to surveys, and interviews with The State News, students who rely on the G.I. Bill complain of a consistent problem: Every semester, the bottleneck delays their funds for months. To cover their expenses in the interim, they’re getting extra jobs, taking on debt, or

simply forgoing certain expenses.

The issue has spurred years of activism, but advocates fear their pleas are falling on deaf ears. They say MSU's president, board and top administrators have heard their demands, but taken no action.

The university claims that the issue is being examined. Still, students are skeptical.

"The money is out there, the laws are there, it's just a lack of action from the administration," said Andrew Branam-Drock, who's studying international relations at MSU after serving for eight years in the Army.

### **‘Salt in the wound’**

The formation of MSU as we know it today is often credited to the much-celebrated president atop the university through the mid-20th century, John Hannah. But in Branam-Drock's reading, the real credit is owed to the congress that passed the G.I. Bill and the veterans who chose to use the funds in East Lansing.

In 1946, as soldiers returned home and started accessing the landmark legislation's benefits, MSU's enrollment doubled. The university put hundreds of bunks in Jenison Fieldhouse and erected vast fields of trailers and huts around campus to house the thousands of new students. The explosion of enrollment allowed the administration to hire 250 new faculty members. Building on that growth in subsequent decades, MSU transformed from a regional agricultural college to a national research university.

"MSU really wouldn't be what it is today without student veterans," Branam-Drock said. Lamenting the issues facing G.I. Bill users at the university today, he said, "It adds some salt in the wound."



Temporary housing tents and huts on campus after World War 2. Courtesy of the MSU Archive.



Bunks were set up in Jenison Fieldhouse amid a post-war enrollment explosion. Courtesy of the MSU Archive.

Today, enrollment is again rapidly increasing for military-affiliated students. The last decade has seen their population swell from 705 to 2,489. In that period, they've generated over \$300 million in tuition for MSU, according to data from MSU's Center for Veterans and Military-Affiliated Students.

Around 1,000 of those students use the G.I. Bill to pay for their education. Some are veterans; others are dependents of veterans or active-duty service members. Their tuition amounts to around \$7 million in payments from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to MSU each year, according to the center's data.

Every semester, School Certifying Officials at MSU have to approve each payment made to every student. They act as a sort of liaison between schools and the VA, verifying that funds are spent as intended by examining students' status and enrollment information.

Certification involves multiple steps and numerous forms. In Branam-Drock's experience, "It's not a click of a button ... it's very bureaucratic, maybe it's even inefficient."

"But, it works if there's enough people," he said. "That's the issue with MSU right now, just not having enough people."

### Consequences of delays

The most recent guidance from the VA recommends that schools employ one full-time certifying official for every 125 students using G.I. Bill funds. At MSU, the current ratio is closer to one official for every 500 students.

That shortage has led to persistent delays for students, who often wait months between applying for G.I. Bill funds and actually receiving the money.

The issue presents a regulatory risk, according to a recent memo from the student veterans center. Michigan's State Approving Agency could launch a Risk-Based Survey of MSU, which are "deep investigations into university practices ... with sometimes as little as 48-hour notice before a team of investigators arrive." Failure could cost MSU its ability to use G.I. Bill funds altogether, the memo warns.

More broadly, the delays have had a real effect on students. A recent survey administered by the student veterans center yielded troubling results, according to a copy of the responses obtained by The State News through a public records request.

A few respondents reported tapping into their savings to cover costs like rent and tuition. Another said they've had to "rely on my mother, who can't afford it." Others said they had to take on credit card debt or loans. Some just went without.

"I have gone hungry, homeless, and my studies have suffered in the beginning of the semester," one student reported. Another wrote that, "If (payments) continue to be delayed, I do not know how I will pay for my car or food."

Some tried to defer expenses, waiting until late in the semester to buy textbooks or required online assignments, for example. But those tactics brought their own consequences, with students saying they missed assignments or failed to understand key concepts in the interim.

The academic consequences were especially acute for the veterans who were supporting spouses or kids of their own, with some respondents reporting that they chose to prioritize their family's needs over things like tuition or textbooks.

Those who took on jobs to cover expenses while waiting for payments were frustrated too. Some noted that the G.I. Bill is designed to support tuition and living expenses so veterans can truly be full-time students.

"It can be disheartening when I am working every day towards my career goals, but feel those who control my finances are not holding up their end of the contract," one student wrote in response to the survey.



Journalism junior and U.S. Marine Corps veteran Kyle Hiner walks to class on April 11, 2025. Edward relies on his GI bill to help pay for his education at Michigan State.

— Photo by [Brendan Mullin](#) | The State News

That "contract" was first presented to some student veterans in simple terms, and served as a driver in their decision to enlist altogether.

"The G.I. Bill is designed so that we can be full time students," said Kyle Hiner, a journalism student who served for 10 years in the Marine Corps. "It's written so we don't have to focus on having to balance a full time job with being a full time student."

"I was 21 when I enlisted, and I was just like 'Yes, I want that,' it was my biggest thing ... We're all promised that, if we get out honorably, we will have this privilege."

Beyond just G.I. Bill users, the certification issues have held up funds for other veterans at MSU.

Jay Velez, for example, told The State News he struggled to get timely approval of a scholarship that covers tuition for permanently disabled veterans. Staff in the financial aid office weren't familiar with the program and a certifying official took months and pressure from the university ombudsperson to approve the funds, said Velez, who studies history and social studies education, hoping to be a high school teacher.



Education junior and U.S. Army veteran Jay Velez studies in the Student Veterans Resource Center on April 11, 2025. Velez was medically separated from the Army after 22 years of service when he developed issues with his eyes.

— Photo by [Brendan Mullin](#) | The State News

Last year, Velez didn't get his spring semester funding until August, three months after classes ended, he said. The delay created a hold on his student account. "I ended up taking a bunch of really trash classes fall semester because I couldn't pay in time," said Velez, who served for over 20 years in the Army and lives in Ann Arbor with his wife and sons.

MSU highlighted Velez in a press release issued by its fundraising office.

"MSU came to his aid by providing financial assistance through the Disabled Veterans Assistance Program," the release said. "Thanks to the connection, Jay says he can pursue his career aspirations, post-military service, with greater confidence and peace of mind."

### **‘Lip service’**

Patrick Forystek, director of MSU's Center for Veterans and Military-Affiliated Students, said he has been pushing MSU to hire more certifying officials since 2020. So far, he's gotten nowhere.

In a recent memo sent to his supervisors, he wrote that MSU would need to hire six more officials to comply with federal guidance. But he pleaded that, "realistically, 1-2 more full-time certifying officials would dramatically impact our deficit and reduce the funding delays."

Students have been lobbying for a change too, with leaders of MSU's Student Veterans of America chapter (SVA) meeting with the Board of Trustees and multiple senior administrators, including President Kevin Guskiewicz. They too fear their pleas are being ignored.

"It's all lip service," said Hiner, who is the SVA's president. "We get told updates, 'oh we have these updates, we're working on this.' But it's been two years with no action."

The meetings with MSU's leaders always go the same way, Hiner said: lots of notetaking, claims they'll look into the issue, words of support, but, thus far, no actual action.

"I told (Guskiewicz) directly, even one more would make a huge difference," said Branam-Drock, who's also in SVA. "I told him to his face, we need at least one more. If you want to make a change here, that's something that's so easy."

After a conversation with Guskiewicz, a Zoom meeting was arranged with Mark Largent, the dean of undergraduate education, and Vennie Gore, then the vice president for student life. The students hoped that conversation would be the start of real action, but they left more frustrated than before, said Hiner.

The administrators promised, again, to "look into it," then criticized the Powerpoint presentation used by the students, according to Hiner and Branam-Drock.

"(Largent) said, 'here's my critiques, you should add X, Y and Z to these slides,' not addressing the issues at all, just saying how our presentation could have been better," said Branam-Drock.

Reached by The State News, Largent said his goal was only to "successfully press for changes that would improve the certification process."

"One might perceive constructive advice to be 'criticism,' but I did not feel like anyone left that meeting upset," Largent said. "I provided advice about how they could sharpen their argument as well as direction about exactly who at MSU had the authority to solve the problem."

Largent said that he and Gore were the wrong people to ask about the certification issue. They "could advocate for changes," but the only person who could actually make them is Dave Weatherspoon, the vice provost who oversees the registrar's office, where certifying officials work.

Weatherspoon told The State News his office is "in the fact-finding phase of our continuous improvement initiative to better serve our VA students."

For the students, the problem is urgent. They've been able to deal with the payment delays, but say some of their peers have opted to drop out amid the financial stress. The issues with certification are frustrating, and finding a job usually pays off quicker than trying to finish a degree, Hiner said. "It's sad when you know people who thrive here, and then they get stiff-armed by the whole administrative burden of getting certified."

They tried to build support among other student organizations, but said those efforts were largely fruitless. The SVA is technically a member of the Council for Advocacy of Marginalized Students, which is part of MSU's undergraduate student government, ASMSU. But Hiner said his group has gone into dormancy with the alliance, retaining its technical membership but not attending meetings or participating in initiatives. The other students involved weren't particularly interested in the SVA's issues, he said.

Other campus groups have removed themselves from the coalition in recent years, citing a lack of communication and general ineffectiveness. Asked about SVA's experience, Branam-Drock said "it felt like a giant waste of time to listen to a bunch of people yell at each other about resolutions that don't do anything."

**‘We feel so bad for them’**

Student veterans stressed that they have no animosity toward the two certifying officials MSU does have. If anything, the issues have made them appreciate them more. "They bend over backwards for us," Hiner said. "We feel so bad for them."

"They're in a consistently overworked and underpaid situation," Branam-Drock said. "It's not them, it's a system issue."

The State News reached out to the certifying officials, but they either did not respond or passed the request off to a colleague, who subsequently did not respond. A university spokesperson provided The State News with a statement saying the officials have "decades of experience in this process and are dedicated and committed to offering exceptional service to our military affiliated students."

"We recognize the challenge of limited human resources and the lack of system tools," spokesperson Amber McCann wrote in the statement. "This limitation is not a reflection of the value we place on VA students, but rather a result of broader institutional constraints."

McCann said that the delays "are impacted by additional reporting requirements implemented by the (VA), which have increased administrative responsibilities and processing time."

Forystek, the director of the resource center, questioned her defense. New reporting requirements were what prompted the VA to create the recommended ratio in the first place, back in 2020, he said.

"It's very confusing to me," he said. "It's similar to the language the VA used to say why we needed the ratio, now it seems like she's using that as justification for a reason why we don't."



Education junior and U.S. Army veteran Jay Velez studies in the Student Veterans Resource Center on April 11, 2025. Velez served over 20 years in the Army and now utilizes his GI bill benefits at Michigan State.

— Photo by [Brendan Mullin](#) | The State News



Awards from the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency are displayed on the wall in Michigan State's Student Veterans Resource Center. MSU has received the gold level award for nine years straight, earning the award every year since its inception in 2015-2016.

— Photo by [Brendan Mullin](#) | The State News



Journalism junior and U.S. Marine Corps veteran Kyle Hiner chats with Ian Knapp, an employee in the Student Veteran's Resource Center on April 11, 2025. Knapp, a U.S. Army veteran, works in the SVRC to coordinate events and services for student veterans like Edward.

— Photo by [Brendan Mullin](#) | The State News

## 'I'm taking care of my veterans'

The students said they've found support with each other and through the resource center. In interviews with The State News, they effusively praised Forystek, its director. But, they framed that community as a sort of a triumph despite an apathetic administration, not a sign of commitment from the institution.

The center features a donated pantry of snacks, a few study rooms, and a tidy common area. Students gather there to watch games on TV and sometimes host tailgates just outside. The operation is largely donor funded, said Forystek, adding that they've only received about \$28,000 from MSU since it opened in 2015. The center just hired its second employee, a move questioned by some students.

"When we met with the president or the board, we told them, 'Hey, having an extra employee in the (center) is all well and good, but if you really want to make a true impactful change, you need to hire more certifying officials,'" Hiner said.

The walls of the center sport an array of plaques and certificates commending MSU's support of student veterans. The Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency, for example, has for years recognized the university with its highest mark for Veteran-Friendly Schools, a gold-status. Students, however, said they aren't sure if MSU has earned the praise.

"(Forystek) did the marine thing, and he's just like, I'm taking care of my veterans," Hiner said. "This is what, in-house, taking care of your boys looks like ... but it's not the whole university."

Forystek himself has lobbied for markers like the gold-status to account for certification issues, he said, potentially jeopardizing MSU's status if the situation doesn't change. (The arbiters have not updated their criteria, Forystek said.)

For an example of true university investment in student veterans, look at Indiana University, said Velez, the history student who struggled to get certification of his scholarship for disabled veterans. There, student veterans have a building on campus, which houses both supportive resources and the certifying officials. Their ratio is close to one official for every 175 students, according to the director of their Center for Veteran and Military Students.

"There are places with a university driven-program, where this is more like (Forystek) clawing at anything he can get for us." Velez said of MSU's center. "This is all (Forystek's) doing, it isn't really from external influence."

This year, students have wondered if they're outgrowing the center's small space in the basement of the student services building, Velez said. The military-affiliated population is rapidly growing at MSU, and the new staffer meant another study room would become an office.

At a recent meeting with MSU's board, SVA students brought up their hope for a larger space, Velez said. They got a familiar reaction: notebooks opened up, concerned looks were exchanged, reassuring words were delivered with seeming care. Then, as far as he knows, nothing happened.

"They were immediately all like, 'We got to get you guys windows!' 'Let's get you on the second floor!' or something like that," Velez said. "But again, I think it's just more lip service."

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# MSU omitted key details in 2014 Nassar case, documents reveal

Alex Walters

September 25, 2024



The Sister Survivors Speak exhibit on April 15, 2019 at the MSU Museum.

When Larry Nassar was first publicly accused of sexually abusing his patients in 2016, Michigan State University’s worries immediately turned to a different case.

The one it handled back in 2014, when the famous sports doctor was cleared of sexual assault and allowed to continue his work for the university.

"Once the 2014 allegations come out, and my assessment is it will shortly, that sentiment will only intensify," MSU spokesperson Kent Cassella wrote in an email hours after the first public report of Nassar’s abuse. The "sentiment" he referenced was brewing speculation that MSU had allowed Nassar’s abuse to continue.

The 2014 allegations did come out, and they certainly fueled the idea that MSU played a role in Nassar's ability to avoid consequence for so long. But, the university has long been able to aggressively downplay those claims.

Administrators have said that the allegations made in 2014 were less severe than those later made publicly because what was reported wasn't inherently sexual. The investigator who handled the case has even been promoted in the years since.

But, long-secret documents are now revealing that behind closed doors, MSU had deep doubts: the university knew that crucial evidence was omitted, swaying the results in Nassar's favor.

All the while, the survivor who reported Nassar was left with a decade of doubt and "self-hatred," wondering why they weren't believed.

### **Survivor blamed themselves**

When Amanda Thomashow reported Nassar to MSU in 2014, they thought they told investigators that he had an erection as he groped them during an appointment, they told The State News.

The detail was essential to their allegation that Nassar had sexually assaulted them under the guise of medical treatment at his office on campus.

But, nothing about arousal made it into MSU's final investigative report.

The omission supported the university's determination that Nassar did not assault Thomashow, and that his groping was all part of legitimate medical treatment for their sports injuries.

After receiving the report, Thomashow questioned themselves, wondering if they somehow forgot to mention his arousal to investigators, or didn't make it clear enough.

It felt like a sort of "gaslighting," Thomashow said. The report clearing Nassar — and MSU's subsequent denial that the university made mistakes in doing so — convinced Thomashow that they must have been wrong.

"It messes with your mind," they said. "(MSU) convinced me that I was crazy for letting the assault bother me so much."

They reached "a new level of self-hatred" in 2016, as hundreds of other survivors started coming forward with allegations against Nassar.

Thomashow became sure they were assaulted, but wondered if some of the other cases were their own fault, they said.

Many of the survivors coming forward were assaulted after 2014, after MSU cleared Nassar in Thomashow's case. So, Thomashow began to worry that if they had just mentioned the erection, MSU would have sided against Nassar, fired him and the other survivors wouldn't have been abused, they said.

New documents, however, suggest Thomashow did tell MSU's investigators about the erection — they just mysteriously left it out of their report.

### **A crucial omission**

In 2017, MSU conducted a sort of autopsy of Thomashow's case: re-interviewing those involved and going through all investigator's files.

Memos summarizing that autopsy greatly challenge the findings in the 2014 investigation. Some of them were among the thousands of long-privileged MSU documents recently released by Michigan's attorney general. The State News obtained others from a person involved.

In the original notes from Thomashow's interview, there are two references to Nassar being aroused, according to one of the memos.

The interview was conducted jointly by Kristine Moore, an MSU Title IX investigator, and Valerie O'Brien, an MSU Police captain.

"Enough to be little too much (in crotch)," they wrote in their notes, according to the autopsy.

They also noted that Thomashow said Nassar "went to corner of room 30-45 sec doing hand sanitizer. I thought weird — maybe erect."

Neither observation was mentioned in their final report.

The final report also made no mention of statements from Nassar's department chair, Jeffrey Kovan. He told investigators it would not be appropriate or medically necessary to touch a patient inside of their underwear, the autopsy found. The report also didn't include information about Nassar's Facebook page getting banned "because of all the young girls," one memo said. It's unclear exactly what that note refers to.

O'Brien has since left MSU Police. In 2020, she was demoted for making "inappropriate comments" and then was charged with drunk driving in 2021.

Moore was promoted in 2014, shortly after issuing Thomashow's report. She now serves as an associate general counsel in the university's legal office.

MSU declined to comment on the issues with the 2014 report. O'Brien could not be reached.

In the 2017 autopsy, O'Brien did offer a partial explanation of the omissions.

She said that Thomashow didn't actually tell them Nassar was aroused. Instead, O'Brien said she and Moore added the various references to an erection into the notes after the interview was over. They were only "speculating," she said.

"(We) simply discussed whether that might have been the case," O'Brien said, according to the autopsy.

That defense was questioned by even the PR consultants MSU hired to design responses to the Nassar issue.

In a report prepared for administrators, consultants from Blue Moon Consulting Group wrote that the omission of the arousal notes could be disastrous for the university's image. Because, as the consultants said, "Would that fact have changed not only the internal investigation but also the review of the local prosecutor?"

Thomashow said they never "got the sense" that anyone at MSU believed the university had truly mishandled their case. Instead, they were repeatedly told the outcome was their fault for not mentioning the erection.

"I asked over and over, why wasn't I believed when (other survivors) were," they said. "The big difference was the erection, they said that was the difference."

"But they knew," Thomashow said.

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# Hate crimes at MSU go uninvestigated

Campus cops face a persistent problem: Victims don't want to work with them

[Alex Walters](#)

February 26, 2025 | 8:19am EST

The victim was on campus working when it started.

“Are you Indian?” the person sitting beside them asked. “Are you Pakistani? Are you Bangladeshi?”

They continued the incessant questioning while putting their feet up on the table, in front of the victim’s monitor, stopping their work.

“Go back to your country,” they told the victim, demanding they “buy a ticket and go back.”

“I want to punch you,” the person said, according to a report filed with Michigan State University and its campus police department.

The report, filed by a witness, said the person then shared other “choice words towards Indians.” They attached a photo of the alleged perpetrator.

The report was exactly the sort of thing [Michigan's hate crime law](#) was written to prevent: intimidation or threats targeted at someone because of a protected characteristic, like their national origin.

But, MSU Police chose not to investigate the matter.

Why? Because when an officer emailed the victim, they never got a response.

Campus police also declined to investigate a case of another student who claimed someone grabbed and harassed them on campus over their national origin; investigations also weren't pursued when a man was punched and slurred after mentioning a boyfriend at a tailgate, or when another Queer person was shoulder-checked and called slurs.

In another case, campus police closed an investigation into who drew Stars of David and a Swastika on the arm of a student sleeping in a dorm; the university's civil rights office also declined to investigate complaints about derogatory remarks made by a zealous heckler frequenting the courtyard behind Wells Hall.

Each time, the reason for dropping the case was the same: Victims declined to cooperate with a formal investigation. In nearly every instance reviewed by The State News, campus cops closed cases that dealt with discrimination in what they describe as "the interest of being victim-centered."

In the one case identified by The State News where victims did cooperate and police pursued an investigation, officers deployed a suite of sophisticated technology to swiftly identify and locate the perpetrators, who have since been [charged](#).

The police reports reviewed by the State News span from October 2023 to October 2024. They were obtained through a series of public records requests, which MSU took months and charged hundreds of dollars to fulfill.

A review of more recent incidents suggests the issue continues. Of the seven hate crimes reported to campus police since October 2024, only one is listed as an active investigation on the university's public crime log. (The State News is awaiting MSU's response to public records requests for the full reports in those cases.)

The persistent problem further complicates an ongoing debate about MSU's handling of hateful incidents.

Some advocates have pressed the administration to do more about a perceived rise in discrimination on campus. MSU's largest Black student organization recently launched an ironically named "Hate Has A Home Here" protest campaign, and a member of MSU's board has publicly [called](#) on the administration to "implement a clear, zero-tolerance policy for all forms of racial violence."

University leaders, meanwhile, have stressed that their options are limited, as some of the hateful statements and incidents at issue fall under the broad protections of the First Amendment.

The previously unreported noncooperation issue adds a new dimension to that discussion, showing that while advocates and administrators spar over the hazy lines of protected speech, clear-cut incidents are going uninvestigated because of victims' unwillingness to work with campus police.

Get in touch

Do you know more about this issue? Is there something we missed or should know? Please get in touch with the reporter by email at [Alex.Walters@statenews.com](mailto:Alex.Walters@statenews.com) or call/text (248) 979-5497

## Lack of victim participation

It's unclear exactly why victims aren't cooperating. Their names and all identifying information are redacted in the police reports, so The State News could not reach out to them directly. Student organizations for various groups affected declined to speculate about the reasons for noncompliance.

Experts have characterized the phenomenon as a sign of broken trust between marginalized students and law enforcement. One recent [study](#) found that college students who experienced hate crimes often declined to cooperate with campus police because they didn't think police would actually help them, especially if they had bad interactions with law enforcement in the past.

"Some students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, may perceive campus or local police as unhelpful — or even harmful — making them more reluctant to report incidents," said Michael Grigsby, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Southern California who studies inequities in higher education and has written about underreporting of hate crimes on campuses.

Some colleges have attempted to lessen that issue, he said. Being more transparent about incidents and investigations, for example, can promote confidence in the university's handling of cases. Colleges can also consolidate and advertise explanatory materials better, with something like a central webpage and clear infographics that explain reporting and support.

"If students perceive the process as overly bureaucratic, too invasive or unlikely to result in justice, they may opt out rather than relive the trauma through repeated questioning or confrontations with the perpetrator," Grigsby said.

MSU Police could hypothetically investigate these cases without victims' participation. But, a department spokesperson said that the initial reports often lack enough information to determine if a crime occurred under the threshold in Michigan law. To get that, they would need to hear more from victims.

MSU Police's attempts to do that, however, are far from explicit. The emails sent to victims offer supportive resources and say that "MSUPD affirms that trauma is real," but never actually mention the possibility of a police investigation or the need for victims' cooperation to conduct one, according to copies attached to police reports. (A department spokesperson declined to answer questions about the emails.)

Hate crimes aren't the only cases where noncompliance is an issue. A recent State News [report](#) found that sexual assault and hazing allegations sent to MSU Police against various fraternities and their members also go uninvestigated because victims don't cooperate with officers.

## MSU administration also closed case

The noncooperation issue also appears to extend past campus police, also affecting at least one case handled by MSU's Office for Civil Rights, a unit within the university that has limited authority to investigate discrimination and enact administrative discipline.

Starting in August 2024, the Civil Rights office received the first in a series of complaints about a man frequenting the courtyard behind Wells Hall.

The first said he “make(s) students uncomfortable, and verbally berate(s) them for their sexual orientation, religious affiliation, gender and more ... yelling at us about how we’re evil, we’re going to hell.” Another said he is “yelling at girls to ‘forgive their rapist’ and ‘forgive their sex offenders.’”

A woman said she felt sexually harassed when he told her “everyone is too preoccupied with the size of their genitals,” apparently because she was wearing a “low-cut top.” One report also accused the man of threatening a roller-skating nonbinary person by saying they would fall into the nearby river and “be a corpse floating in the Red Cedar.” Another claimed he called two Arab students “terrorists.” A group of students who were discussing homophobia were reportedly told “we could be shot at any minute and would go to hell because they hadn’t repented.”

It was exactly the sort of thing the Civil Rights investigators were supposed to handle.

MSU Police had sent an officer to observe the man, according to a report, and they deemed that he wasn’t committing a criminal offense because his speech was protected by the First Amendment. The Civil Rights office, however, administers a broader Anti-Discrimination Policy which covers speech if it is “severe, persistent, or pervasive” and “creates an unreasonable interference with the individual’s work or educational experience.”

But, those who complained didn’t respond to repeated outreach from Civil Rights investigators or said they wouldn’t participate in an investigation, leading MSU to close the case, according to the case file.

In another case, MSU’s Civil Rights investigators were a victim’s preferred alternative to police.

The student who had Stars of David and a Swastika drawn on her arm while she slept briefly cooperated with police, being interviewed, connecting them with relevant witnesses and providing text messages and images corroborating the story.

But she later told officers not to proceed, according to the police report, saying she hadn’t realized a criminal investigation would be opened because of her report.

She wasn’t initially aware of the separate process with MSU’s Civil Rights investigators, and wanted to instead pursue that, the police report says. MSU declined to say how, or if, that case was eventually resolved.

### **Tech, new laws push police to do more**

In the one incident of discrimination MSU Police did investigate, officers drew on the university’s new campus surveillance system to track down suspects and make arrests. The incident also underscores how new Michigan laws are broadening what can be investigated.

After a group of local youths viciously beat a gay couple in MSU’s main library, the victims cooperated with an MSU Police investigation.

After taking their statements, officers used a [new array](#) of thousands of security cameras to track the suspects from the library to a nearby parking structure. They then used facial recognition software in an attempt to identify the suspects.

The software, Clearview AI, is controversial among civil liberties advocates and has paid hundreds of millions of dollars in settlements to people who sued over privacy concerns.

As is MSU’s nearly \$10 million investment in the new surveillance system, which was criticized by student activists and questioned by experts who doubted it would make campus safer.

But the previously unreported use of the system to find those responsible for the library beating could represent a sort of fulfillment of MSU’s promise that despite the concerns, their new tech would help them solve crimes.

An MSU Police spokesperson said the department hopes to be able to respond to more reports — with or without victim participation — given the additional technology.

The case also highlights the changing legal pathways police have to crack down on hateful acts.

The beating was not technically a hate crime. The perpetrators were charged only with aggravated assault, despite reportedly targeting and mocking the victims for their sexual orientation before attacking them.

That’s because when it occurred in April 2023, sexual orientation was not a protected status under Michigan’s civil rights law. New laws enacted in the time since, however, add gender identity and sexual orientation to the list of protected characteristics.

*Student Affairs Reporter Anish Topiwala and Student Life Reporter Demonte Thomas contributed reporting.*

Get in touch

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