



SEPLER & ASSOCIATES  
*Strategic and Respectful Approaches  
To Contemporary Workplace Issues*



Prepared by Sepler & Associates for the National Park Service  
Office of Relevancy, Diversity and Inclusion

## Storybook

# NPS VOICES TOUR 2018





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Systems and Leadership	...01
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SUCCESS STORIES .....	01
HR AND RESPONSE SYSTEMS .....	02
EVALUATION AND PROMOTION .....	03
SEASONALS .....	03
RESOURCES .....	04
SUPPORT AND COMPLAINT SYSTEM EFFECTIVENESS .....	04
ACCOUNTABILITY .....	07
LEADERSHIP .....	08
NPS MISSION .....	08
NPS AND PARK CULTURE .....	09
DIVERSITY .....	11
Employee Engagement and Grassroots	...13
<hr/>	
COLLABORATION AND TEAMWORK .....	13
CONTINUUM BEHAVIORS .....	13
HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION .....	15
NEED FOR PROACTIVITY AND PREVENTION .....	18
SAFETY .....	19



# INTRODUCTION

Listening to the voices of NPS in live meetings throughout the country was one way to hear about things that mattered, to help begin healing for those who have been harmed, and to begin to understand solutions. The web sessions brought together voices from across the park service, introducing NPS employees to one another and finding common experience. The Voices tour was not limited to those who attended meetings or participated in webcasts. An anonymous portal allowed anyone who wanted to tell a story or provide a longer narrative with the opportunity to do so. To honor those stories and those voices, we present a compendium of some of the most powerful and representative stories... in the words of NPS employees. Some of the stories have been lightly edited. No substantive changes have been made.





# SYSTEMS AND LEADERSHIP

## SUCCESS STORIES



Our team here is like a family. We all try to take care of each other. I have worked for 12 different national park units, and only a couple compare to the strong team that Acadia has. Acadia takes care of its people. This year it created a Leadership Academy, and just today we are having a two-hour dialogue with the Superintendent about how to address doing more with less. We are going to brainstorm as a park on ways to better manage people's workloads. In addition, the Superintendent this year started sending out monthly emails letting us all know what is new in his world and the parks in attempt to keep us all better informed. I think if more parks start adopting these protocols the NPS teams throughout the country will feel heard and cared about."

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I have been blessed in my NPS career with working with very supportive supervisors and management staff, both men and women. Earlier in my career I was often in a work environment where I was the only female; I was treated as an equal. Throughout my NPS career, I have experienced a positive and respectful and fair work environment most of the time." (20+ year female employee)

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My supervisor trusts me and allows me to get my work done in a way that works for me. I have the ability to pursue professional development and challenge myself. I have positive relationships with those I work with and I feel that my work matters. When I come to work I know I will be supported, learn, grow, and even have fun! Fostering these environments, I believe, is key to improving work conditions."

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I have been fortunate enough to have direct supervisors who are open, listen with attention, and support me. In conflict, one supervisor in particular validated my experience, asked for a statement, and handled it in a respectful and anonymous manner. Knowing this particular supervisor and others in my work group are willing and capable of handling any level of conflict or harassment, allows me to come to a welcoming work environment. These particular supervisors will always have my respect and trust."

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My supervisor consistently communicates his commitment to fairness and adherence to NPS policy related to sexual harassment and discrimination. He acts on that commitment through his personal conduct (i.e., treating all team members with respect and without favoritism based on an individual's race, gender, orientation, etc.)"

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My 35-year career was witness to well over 99% very good staff who were respectful and helpful to each other. We should be proud of this huge success. With that said, I have witnessed supervisors over-controlling their staff without need, subordinates who threatened (harassed) supervisors with false complaints and legal action, and many well-intended actions that were not received well because of some past experience or some other lens they viewed the actions through. Our staff is a reflection of culture, a diverse culture with many norms and intentions."

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This is my fourth park. I had a situation at another park where a fellow coworker was sexually harassing me; although my superintendent was new, she swiftly handled the situation and he no longer bothered me (his records revealed he had already been disciplined for a previous sexual harassment occurrence). That was a good experience, and I felt supported.”

“

The leadership in the park I work in, at every level (even up to superintendent), is very open to hearing from those at every level of the organization. When people feel their opinions matter, they are more likely to be confident and speak up when something is not right or could be better.”

“

I've been really lucky as a woman in the NPS, to have served under more female superintendents than male. I didn't realize until the recent Congressional hearings on sexual harassment that females were a minority in our leadership ranks. I can tell you that working for seven different female superintendents helped me have the confidence to know that I too could manage a national park. Additionally, nearly half of my FLETC class was female. That helped give me the confidence to know that I belonged in law enforcement. Representation matters.”

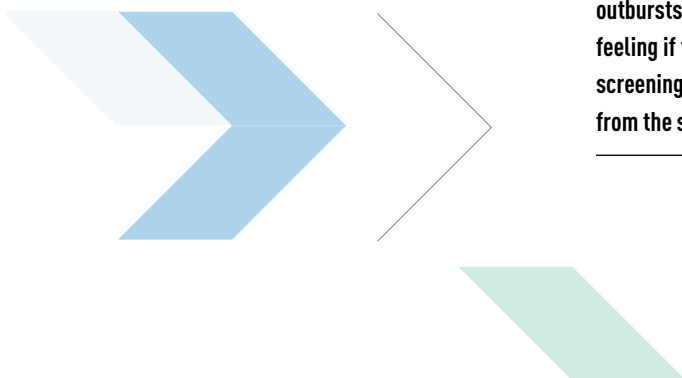
## HR AND RESPONSE SYSTEMS

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Human Resources is totally dysfunctional. Removing personnel staff from the parks means that employees don't even know where to go for HR related questions, supervisors receive VERY little training (and cannot even make job offers), and professional HR staff do not see (or even, think) the work that they do affects people EVERY day. A job application is just more government paperwork that contains personally identifiable information.”

“

Long ago, I experienced harassment based on my sexual orientation. Thankfully at that time, we had an EEO officer located at our park. She was wonderfully swift in helping me file my complaint, assist with mediation with the offender, and the issue didn't occur again for the few remaining months of that employees work before they left. Later, (a few years ago) I had similar harassment issues with a new coworker, who also was threatening physical violence. Unfortunately, we did not have an EEO officer at the park at the time, but I was still able to get assistance from my supervisor. The issue was addressed, but the offender then reacted with hate and spite after this. The prolonged stress of interacting with the hate-filled individual was very wearing, but I was relieved when they later took another job with another agency. This individual admitted they'd lied on their application and shared they had untreated PTSD that may have been contributing the violence-threatening outbursts. Nevertheless, work would be much safer feeling if there were some more effort made into screening out potentially mentally unstable individuals from the service, for the safety of our employees.”



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If the American taxpayers could see the friction and hesitancy our management team faces when trying to address poor performance and conduct, they'd be appalled. They'd also lose their minds if they saw how much money we spend on contract investigators for fraudulent, baseless EEO cases, filed by the same people over and over (when they are being subjected to counseling or discipline). Why allow EEO as a route for appealing disciplinary or performance cases? Start turning away the EEO frequent fliers and tell them to take their appeals to appropriate forums that are designed for those purposes. "Perception of discrimination?" I think not. Let's be honest. EEO is viewed at my park as a means for poor performers and misconduct cases to retaliate against management, roll the dice for a cash handout in a settlement (under the advisement of the locker-room lawyer), and siphon off our operating budget. When the union doesn't think a case has merit, they have the option not to spend resources on it but they do encourage the complainant to file with EEO... The frequent fliers are perpetrators of discrimination, fraud, waste, and abuse. They have nothing to lose and no one is willing to tell them their mis-use of the system is inappropriate, at best. I haven't seen a legitimate EEO case yet."

## EVALUATION AND PROMOTION

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I think that NPS needs to consider how we promote employees to supervising positions, and how we train those people to be successful at supervising. As an agency, we have incredible skills and abilities... but supervising requires a very different skill set. If we truly prepare supervisors, give them the tools (mostly time!) to succeed, and hold them accountable for what they are doing, I think that we would see some improvements. One out of my past five supervisors spent more than about 4 hours per year making sure that I know what is expected of me. I have been a supervisor for many years, so I think I have some insight into successful supervising. P.S. — I got my supervision training with the USFS, R5..."

## SEASONALS

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We are taking advantage of dedicated and bright interns, partners, contractors seasonal and term employees that are hopeful for permanent positions. It is literally harming their mental and physical health. Direct, simple honesty is required about the prospect for a job. It is immoral to lead them on. Imagine if it were you in their positions. We can't let them make bad life decisions so the NPS can have some short-term gain. We need to be very transparent and honest about their odds for getting permanent positions. It is difficult and uncomfortable conversation, but as managers it is your job."



“

Former, male, seasonal employee experienced workplace harassment and sexual misconduct by permanent employee and was told by division chief, supervisor, and EEO counselor that there was nothing they could do because of seasonal status. Other employees have complained about this same permanent employee, but employee has 'been around forever' and has 'had a lot of influence.' Now that employee has returned to NPS, continues to complain, but nothing has happened. Been told that employee is married and has kids and that it would be hard for him to get another job.”

“

I have seen white men give other white men jobs they are not qualified for. I watched a WG5 go straight to a GS11. The man was not qualified to be a WG5! Meanwhile, I can't even apply for a GS11 unless I quit NPS and start over again. NPS needs to look at the whole resume. I have the experience for a GS11 but was willing to take a seasonal WG3 just to get my foot in the door. I chose to work for NPS because I believe in the mission and believed I had something to offer. When will real experience be recognized?”



## RESOURCES

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I see the NPS fostering a mindset of scarcity and competition. This starts right from the beginning, the decision point to join the NPS as a seasonal, the confusion of the job search, application process, and associated competition to get positions where one wants to work. It continues through the quest for a permanent job (something hopefully aided with the implementation of LMWFA — although which unintentionally could exacerbate this condition as time in grade as a GS-07 is now worth considerably more as it determines whether one is able to apply for GS-09 positions). Once that elusive permanent job is attained, employees are next faced with a perceived need for continued promotion and career advancement in order to obtain more stature, input or status. When one feels the only way to be heard, gain more autonomy, inclusion, and respect is to 'climb the ladder' it fosters a renewed competition, particularly between those "married to the job" and willing to go anywhere/do anything, with those who have less mobility due to family/geographic constraints. In totality, scarcity abounds in this environment of competition, backstabbing, jealousy, and "gate keeping" of information and skills, all of which are totally antithetical to the idea of abundance that the NPS was initially created to promote.”

## SUPPORT AND COMPLAINT SYSTEM EFFECTIVENESS

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My advice to anyone who is being harassed or unfairly disciplined would be to not say anything and leave the NPS as quickly, quietly and gracefully as possible. Superintendents that prioritize backing their division chiefs over investigating and resolving problems negate any efforts to make the work environment safe and fair. It's one thing to treat homosexuals equally and quite another to give them the power and freedom to break laws and conspire to deprive people of their rights.”



“

My advice is that you tell people exactly what will happen if they report harassment. Don't sugarcoat it. Tell them the truth. Tell them that managers and supervisors will circle the wagons and protect each other. Tell them that EEO counselors and Employee Relations Specialists and everyone else will treat them like dirt. Tell them that even if they don't lose their jobs, their careers will be over. Tell them that even if their case goes to the EEOC, it can be four or more years just to get a hearing. Tell them that a decent attorney will cost at least \$15,000.”

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Management allowed the harassing individual in my case to write the summary of the investigation into his own wrongdoing. Yes, that is correct. the harassing individual was allowed to determine if they were responsible for their own wrongdoing. Further, management refused evidence and witness statements that supported my claims during the investigation. Management also refused to acknowledge there was wrongdoing and claimed that I was the problem for raising the concerns of wrongdoing.”

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I felt my safety was at risk, but because he never 'hit' me, I had no place to go. I feared for my safety every day. ARD did not know this was going on because he would never want to have to deal with his buddy he never asked. The leadership was blind to this situation and this superintendent could never do wrong. The agency needs to recognize that emotional and psychological health and safety is more damaging than traditional occupational injuries in most cases. NO one should have to go home at night worried about going back to the toxic environment the next day. We have 'near misses' in safety but not in emotional safety. This was a near miss and had it not been for a heart attack I suppose I would have been the silent victim of a horrific oversight.”

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It is very difficult to report a supervisor for things not covered by a protected basis (i.e. race, gender, disability). I reported a supervisor for creating a hostile work environment and received immeasurable retaliation. My immediate supervisor physically assaulted me and lied about it, but I chose not to file a grievance because of the emotional damage and lack of support from all avenues (Ombuds, EEAP, park admin, & HR). Instead, I left my permanent position and took a huge demotion at another park.”

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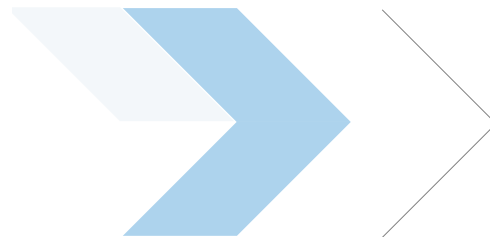
I attempted to hold an employee accountable for a clear sexual harassment case. After a year of review in the regional office and the solicitor's office, nothing has been done. This is inexcusable and makes me laugh at all the lip service about changing the workplace. I can do my part as a supervisor, but I'm powerless when faced with the bureaucratic sloth of the system.”

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“

I complained to my supervisor and park management about one co-worker creating a hostile work environment for myself and the rest of the staff over 15 years and it wasn't until he assaulted me that park management finally took action. The complaint went to the region and they only considered it 'a single offense' and now he's back working with me. I have assurances that any retaliation or continuance of illegal behavior will be dealt with swiftly. I'm just waiting for the next shoe to drop, it always has.”

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“

I have been the victim of workplace harassment and sexual misconduct. At the time I was a seasonal employee [and] the offending employee was a permanent employee. I was told by the division chief, my supervisor, and an EEO counselor that I did not have any options because of my seasonal status. I later found that several employees had submitted complaints against this person. The NPS refused to act for reasons I still don't understand. Ultimately, I left the park and the offending employee is still creating a difficult work place for people (as I have been told). This behavior will persist because the offending person has just 'been around forever' and, in the words of my supervisor "had a lot of influence" in the park. These empty excuses allow bad behavior to persist. Just like many others, I was the victim in this circumstance. However, I was punished and, at the time, decided to leave the NPS. It took a long time for me to consider joining the NPS again. Now that I have returned to the NPS, I have shared my experience and still nothing has been done about this individual. Often the excuses I hear are 'he's married,' or 'he's got a kid in school/ or 'where else is he going to work in this community?'. I believe nothing will happen and other people with a lack of integrity will learn from this situation and develop skills to avoid punishment."

“

After 15+ years as a division chief (30+ career NPS employee), removed from position due to allegations made by subordinate employees of poor management and supervision. Detailed to unclassified position for undetermined length — while an investigation (administrative inquiry) is conducted of the allegations, a report is provided to management, and management determines what course of action to take. There is no timeline or requirement being set for the investigator to complete their report. These actions took place 2 months after I made a complaint that another division chief had harassed and caused hostile work environment, and 2 days after complaining about another employee and their spouse sending harassing and demeaning email to park staff. Six months and I'm still waiting for management to take action about the email matter. I've grieved the detail (removal) and the lack of action — four weeks later, still waiting for a response to the step-1 grievance. I have never felt more distraught than now — and never felt more unfairly treated."

“

I filed an EEO grievance five years ago and nothing happened. There has been no communication regarding the status. I have no idea if the case is still active. The entire ordeal was expensive, stressful and negative. I have absolutely nothing positive to say about the ADR, Labor Relations Specialists, HR, managers, or supervisors involved."



“

I was physically groped for a year by someone who was my co-worker at a supervisor during the course of that year. I continued to tell him to stop and physically push him away. Why didn't I report it? 1) I watched another employee report harassment and a team of people swooped down on the park and everyone was talking badly about that employee. I was afraid of how people would talk about me if word got out I filed a claim against this person. 2) when I did talk to an EEO person, I was told that if I filed a claim, it would be a claim against the NPS for not acting, not a claim against the employee. I just wanted the employee to be punished for his behavior.”

“

I have a colleague who has refused to work with me or anyone else civilly for over a year. He has filed several grievances against the superintendent and others, making him impervious to being disciplined because the superintendent is afraid of being charged with retaliation. Uncivil employees can persist in the NPS much longer than other federal agencies and the private workforce because our performance and conduct processes are so slow and clunky. I moved to one park to another to find that this employee's behavior has essentially hindered both progress and morale at the park and brought the issue to the region. No one wants to handle a messy situation, and the HR folks in this region have been slow to respond, giving inappropriate and inept responses (is he hurting you physically? have you considered another job?) My coworkers have lost hope in any resolution and seek other positions. I think we clearly need more staff to handle employee relations, and some time frames to produce clear directions for both employees and managers. Uncivil situations left to persist derail our morale, wellness, and effectiveness as individuals, teams and an agency.”

## ACCOUNTABILITY

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Superintendents (and RDs) have complete power. There is no way that regional offices can put any checks on their power over subordinates, nor do they seem to want to know or have the capacity to know what is going on in parks. There is no one to notice the casual abuses of power, and the system has no checks or balances. A situation has to be really bad before anyone will report a superintendent. The acceptance of casual abuse and bullying is everywhere. Employees are too vulnerable to say anything.”

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Unchecked superintendents — which is most of them. They don't have any direct supervision in the park and are like gods. Some good some bad. The bad can ruin lives. I had a sociopath that I feel drove people to drink, suicide and me to contemplate leaving the NPS. There needs to be a process by which staff can provide the superintendents supervisor direct review. Right now, there is no way for the superintendent's supervisor to know what is going on in a park The Employee Viewpoint Survey is not enough. There needs to be a way staff can share issues above the superintendent. An Ombuds that will coordinate staff response into a report the supervisor (deputy director?) can then bring to the superintendent to deal with.”

“

An incident that happened to me at a big Civil War park was swept under the rug to keep the peace among staff with the thought that we would be able to work together to continue pumping out massive amounts of programs and tours. This hindered our ability to work as a team while allowing for a ranger to sexually harass three female employees, myself included. It was because of the “don't say anything and just make it through for the sake of the job/tours/ programs” was the main objective and took priority over the mental and physical health of the employees.”

## LEADERSHIP



Within the last couple of years, for the first time in my career, I experienced an issue in the NPS that led to depression and serious mental health issues, and as a female made me feel discriminated against and that I was less of a person. I guess I have been fortunate that prior to this incident I have never been made to feel like a 'weak woman,' but this issue certainly made me feel this way. My immediate supervisor and colleagues were supportive of me throughout the issue, but upper level management's willful ignoring of the issue almost made me leave the NPS. In particular, there was one member of the management team who has a reputation for being difficult and disrespectful, who I was told, made comments behind closed doors regarding the situation implying that there wasn't a problem, but rather a problem employee. My supervisor and colleagues have been fighting this same issue for years and obviously there has been no change. I got directly caught in the issue and it almost cost me my career and my life because of how bad it made me feel about myself. Had it not been for the support of my immediate supervisor and coworkers things may have ended differently."



A bully boss has wrecked the park. Her unchecked behavior has resulted in low productivity, poor attitudes, a flush of talent, increased sick leave, a poor reputation for the work unit resulting in no less than six individuals accepting jobs, only to do their homework and change their minds. Staff are not partners but suspects, the superintendent is not truthful nor credible, she is mistrustful and is not trusted. The NERO is aware but refuse to act. She has had OSC, OIG, OPR (requested) investigations. She has had a grievance, expedited inquiry and now an EEO case against her (all in the last few years by multiple employees). The lack of staffing agency wide, the number of detailees (unwilling or unable to act for fear of losing their upward mobility) the incompetent and burned-out employees makes for a toxic stew. A real leadership and ethics void."



I feel that some supervisors are not suited to be supervisors at all, but they often reach a certain GS level and are given responsibilities that they handle poorly. I've also worked with several senior, and more experienced supervisors that made my work life a joy. Figuring out a way to weed out the bad supervisors would go a long way. I've never seen a bad supervisor removed. I also find a general reluctance for discipline. Our office had what I would consider to be a hostile work environment. This resulted in a large investigation with signed statements by employees, etc. but the result was the reassignment (lateral GS position) of one employee and the reinstatement of another. It felt like neither were held accountable and we are starting to see some of the very same issues (centering around disrespect, excessive micromanagement, and bullying) return."

## NPS MISSION



NPS and DOI leadership needs to spend time at the diverse areas that the NPS protects to hear the stories of the employees and visitors who hold these places dear. It appears that the voices of the protectors and stewards of our land are being lost to the voices of energy and development and extraction interests. Parks provide non-monetary value that far exceeds this short-term view."



## NPS AND PARK CULTURE



NPS culture has some nefarious management practices that I have seen over the years, the ugliest of which is the impersonal, icy-toned memo or email to a subordinate, designed to ‘put them in their place.’ This type of memo, common among insecure supervisors in our midst, pretends to be a form of communication and corrective or disciplinary action for the betterment of operations; but the reality is that the writer seeks to avoid real face-to-face communication and to close off inter-locution by means of a one-way dictatorial statement. By this means, he can avoid confronting the real problem, if there even is one, while satisfying himself, in his own mind at least, that he has ‘dealt with it’ efficiently and effectively.”



I love working for the NPS, and for the majority of the time, people in my area are treated with utmost respect. But, it’s very difficult to be a conservative Christian in the current environment. There’s an undercurrent of very liberal talk and ideas in my workplace, and people’s political views are so very obvious. The last thing that is ok to make fun of is Christians. I usually can have grace and overlook it. But I can’t get this out of my mind: I would expect that an organization that describes itself as impartial and open to all ideas, and professes to tell the stories of ALL Americans, to know better. My co-workers realize it’s not ok to joke about Muslims or Jewish people, or to use racial slurs. But, constantly using the term ‘come to Jesus moment’ seems to be ok with them, or flippantly referring to those who believe the Bible as ignorant or science-phobic. It’s a challenge that I don’t feel like I can talk openly about with my co-workers. Or, I may be perceived as one who pushes their own religious agenda. I know I would be attacked as a hater for saying that gender is not something you can choose or change”



Often, within my organization, and Park, I am told that ‘We are family here, yet I feel more like an outsider than I have ever felt at any job within the multiple agencies that I have worked at over 15 years of Federal Service. Just because I am not ‘born in the park’ or have not ‘been through the park system’ for several years (10+ usually) or because I am single, or because I am a veteran does not mean that my opinion and skills do not matter. I was selected to do this job, moved from Washington DC across the country to take this job, and I feel my opinions, skills, and experience have been cast aside as if though I am day one on this job and all that experience had never existed. All because I have never worked in a park before (which is not true, this is my second park) or because I have not worked in “This” park for a number of years. It seems that if I do not know the ways of this particular park, then I do not know anything at all, despite having been in my profession for 25 years throughout the world. This particular place is one of the most unwelcoming places for a newcomer. Something should be put in place where newcomers are welcomed by their new peers, and neighbors. I have been here 2 years, and only 3 different people have invited to their home or invited me to a social function. The rest of the time, I am alone, at my own home, in a beautiful, but sad place. This park is a great place to visit. a true gem of the world, but an awful place to work. It is quite soul crushing.”



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I have many friends in the NPS and they are likely to be lifelong friends. Our common shared experiences have brought us to a point of tight bonds. However, there are people that I would just as soon see ousted from this organization. I used to like the sense that we were the NPS Family until I began to realize that our family is dysfunctional and that it is one in grave need of therapy. I had a co-worker once that set me up every single time. We would strategize and plan our budgets and other management level planning and when we got into meetings with our boss he would allow me to say what we had decided and then threw me under the bus where the boss would chastise me and held things from me and we never got to the professional dialogues that should be taken into account during meetings such as this. Siblings fighting? This is not the family that we want. I had a supervisor one that told me that she didn't care about me at all. As far as she was concerned the job is all she wanted me to engage in. Is this a family I would want to be a part of? I counseled a co-worker's employee who had been sexually harassed by a co-worker and her supervisor said it was impossible — she left the NPS because the supervisor began to make fun of her situation and called her over reactive and too sensitive. Not in my family. Superintendents who physically throw things, slam their hands-on desks and undermine employees. the harsh “because I said so” type of leader. This is not the Dad I desire in my family.”

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My experiences are pretty universal. I expect nothing but misplaced power and ego wherever I go. This has always been from superintendents and above. It is something about the misinterpretation of position to power. The powerful few keep others down and come across as if they are the only one that has any answers. Uncivil behaviors are the norm among this group. I have multiple experiences of yelling, slamming objects and hands, demeaning subordinate's character and acting as though they are untouchable. In five different states and in seven different jobs the misplaced power of one has crumbled many a worksite.”

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The NPS is made up of great people. But, I also notice, once people get in, they don't move around much or seek opportunities outside of NPS. This really limits their opportunities to grow professionally. Whether it is good or not, it is really valuable to experience work cultures of other Agencies. They do things differently. I see a lot of people who are emotionally and communicably stifled by their only work experience being in NPS. There is also too much focus on traditions and NPS culture. Culture does ebb and flow as new hires come in, and as we build more of a millennial workforce, this could change a lot. But there is something about Tradition that seems to hold everyone back. As someone who has felt comfortable, and grown professionally, by working in multiple agencies, I think the traditional culture of NPS is fundamentally what is holding it back and preventing the positive changes that are needed. To my previous point, there seems to be a sense of entitlement for promotion that exists in NPS. And this seems to be one we have done to ourselves, because we make it so hard to bring new people into the organization. We should support more rotation programs, details to work in other parts of the organization, etc. At a minimum, we need to stop the practice of furloughs as being a normal part of an employee's job. That is blatantly wrong. And when individuals go on details, the receiving office should incur the costs, not the losing office. This would motivate supervisors to let their staff experience other offices and opportunities to grow professionally and not keep them confined.”



“

I have had a few experiences where both women and minority supervisors have misused their perceived power. They have been put up on some sort of NPS token tower and believed that they could act the same as those who put them there; however, they became far more unpredictable than the Good Ole' Boys. The outrage, the micromanagement and the grudge and retaliation were very personal... they not only had to uphold their personal control of their employees, but they had to uphold their status as a favored one. Throwing things in the office, yelling, slamming hands onto desks, not approving leave, undermining their employees, setting systems of control and power up to hold down employees. In so many cases, it would have been easier for them to just hit me... At least I would have had a choice to do something or not. Instead, they seemed to go right to the edge. The leadership in this organization needs to stop using minorities as tokens and allowing them to do exactly what we are working to stop. Power, control and dominance needs to stop from everyone.”

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The quality of my work environment has decreased considerably since the workplace questionnaire came out a couple of years ago. It seems that everyone is more worried about feelings now than doing their work. Also, you have supplied definitions for what is to be considered wrong that meet the standards of one demographic instead of the whole spectrum of people who work for you. I dislike feeling paranoid about every action I take or question I ask or answer for fear that someone could possibly take it and use it against me and get me fired or reprimanded simply because they disagree with me or don't share the same gender. There is an avenue to report someone but not to defend oneself. One year ago, my answers would have been very different. Nearly perfect would have been here instead and I would have told you, you shouldn't pander to the deficiencies of the few to try to benefit many. Maybe it is just the newest management at my particular park unit, but I feel as though it has been carried a bit too far by some and validated by management/policy decisions.”

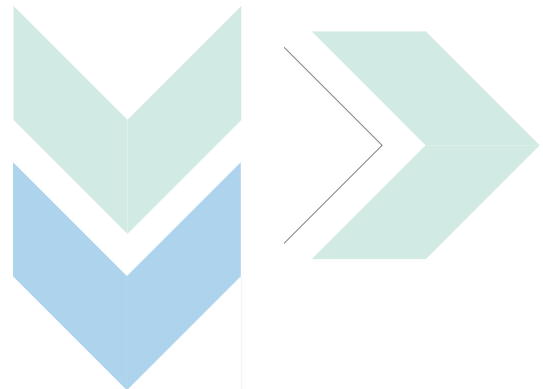
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Behaviors of incivility are so embedded in our culture that it is hard to give one specific situation. It doesn't matter where I have gone (five different parks) in my career the predictive behaviors are all the same: Misplaced power and ego of the highest position (usually superintendent). In other words, the learned behaviors within the NPS are that once you become a superintendent you have all power and can treat people however you feel effective — in so many cases it is the paternal discipline model of a white male dominated organization. Undermining each other's work, competition, silos, isolation, the in groups and the out groups, bad and offensive language, off colored jokes with all of this... we also have an organization that fears confrontation to the point where performance plans are not even reviewed.”

## DIVERSITY

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NPS needs to embrace and not deny our cultural biases of the past. It is time we use that lens every time we carve a path for one employee and make another one fight for it. It is time for leadership to work harder to make our organization look like America — it won't be easy but be specific about the actions NPS should take to do it.”



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I spent five years at a park as a GS-7 permanent before my current assignment. In those five years, the park hired exactly one person at a GS-9 or above that was not a white male (out of ~7 hires). The one woman was hired only after a white male was hired for the same GS-9 job and quit two weeks later (without having to repay his relocation). All but one of the student-to-permanent employee conversions were males. Junior grade female employees were routinely ignored by the superintendent when bringing up safety concerns. Male employees were permitted to treat female employees poorly or in clearly discriminatory ways with no accountability, and junior grade employees feared for their jobs and would/could not complain about it.

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The uniform regulations were developed during an exclusive, sexist time in our country's history. All employees should be allowed to wear jewelry regardless of their gender. Remove the sex standards all together from the uniform regulations. Additionally, DOI should not try to control what someone's face looks like, whether they wear a uniform or not. Historically many tribal groups wore nose piercings and other piercings. Those should be accepted as well. If an employee is wearing a clean, pressed uniform with polished boots, it should not matter to anyone if they are wearing jewelry or color of their skin (even if it is tattooed). Welcome culture, don't white wash it like the department has been for the last 100 years. I don't feel welcome in the NPS, as I am being told to hide my culture.”

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# EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND GRASSROOTS

## COLLABORATION AND TEAMWORK



In my 30 years with the NPS, I have never seen such a chasm between the employees in the different divisions. Working together as a team is no longer part of the culture. Employees in one division have no idea what the other jobs entail yet they are highly critical of them. Some divisions feel that they are superior and that the other employees are only here to serve them. It doesn't seem to be about the visitors any more — just a job to get through each day. I suggest some cross training, team building so that everyone learns their role is just part of what it takes to successfully operate the parks. It seems symbolic but maybe change the terminology — call them something other than “divisions” because there truly is a “division” between them in the NPS these days.”

## CONTINUUM BEHAVIORS



NO person should have this kind of power over another. The dominance of positions in the Service is crippling. I think of myself as a very strong and emotionally healthy employee but as a new chief with a powerful, strict and condescending superintendent who constantly bullied me to the place of breaking caused me to plan my own suicide. Suicide was my only way out from this constant power and bullying... my expense was her delight. Her image in the community and the Service was more important than doing her job of supporting her staff. The only thing that saved me, as I sat under a tree with a rope, was the thought of my family having to deal with this person.”



A lot of good division chiefs, who are excellent supervisors and seem to have a lot of power are bullied by superintendents and are afraid to say anything. They protect their subordinates but can't speak up for themselves. The career stakes are very high for them, so the price they pay is silence. They need help with bystander training. They need support.”



There are superintendents who scream at division chiefs so that subordinates who hear this screaming text the division chief to see if she is OK. There are superintendents who seem to have great reputations with the people above them who threaten division chiefs with poor references. There are superintendents that manage by chaos — no consistency from decision to decision so they are always in control. There are regional directors and deputies that are completely invested in favoritism. There are regional directors who have employees working for them outside of the NPS — like having the regional real estate specialist be the RD's realtor when he buys a new house. There are superintendents that practice age discrimination with impunity and who feel bulletproof in the belief that no one below them has the temerity or money to ever challenge them.”



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My supervisor is very close friends with another person at the same level in the division as me. They are often telling jokes with each other and sometimes they are at the expense of the rest of us. I have heard them make fun of me personally from time to time. It is a small office. I typically try to ignore it and move on with my day, even if it really just makes me not want to be here. One time the two of them were making fun of me in the lunch room loud enough for somebody passing by in the hall to hear. The passerby was upset to hear another coworker being mocked like that and reported it to the park superintendent. The superintendent told my supervisor somebody had heard them mocking me and sent him to my office to apologize. My supervisor said that he would work to improve the issue and keep it from happening again. So now they eat lunch with the door closed to make it harder to hear who they are making fun of. And nothing about the culture or trying to respect each other has changed. If there could be some way to try and get the idea of just respecting the people you work with into the management program that would make my time at work so much better.”

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The bullying incidents with my direct supervisor has been off and on for about 10 years. I talked with my second level supervisor (my supervisor’s supervisor) multiple times regarding the bullying, but it continued even after my second level supervisor said he spoke to my supervisor. In addition, my second level supervisor has also threatened me with reprisal when I didn’t agree with his opinion, which does not give me confidence that he is unbiased in my concerns regarding bullying by my direct supervisor. I have also been told by both my direct and second level supervisor that I should not go above them to discuss incidents.”

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I’m currently in an environment where I am bullied by a co-worker. While everyone is aware of the behavior, it has gone on for 2+ years with no action. I know I have the support of my supervisor and leadership and they are aware of the issue but at the end of the day, it still impacts my stress level at work and the quality of my performance. The bullying behaviors are subtle, passive aggressive and indirect which makes it hard to take action. If I was a supervisor, I would be challenged to know how to deal with this. It’s much easier when the actions are direct and have an immediate consequence but that’s not how most of this behavior plays out in the workplace. What tools are out there or can be developed for both supervisors and employees to deal with this behavior that is indirect but impacts the work environment?”

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When I was a seasonal, I had a lead who was a bully. The bully’s behavior was reported to the next supervisor (by multiple individuals) and nothing was done because it was deemed easier to ‘ride it out because the bully was leaving soon anyways.’ The lead continued to be a bully and create an unpleasant work environment, but because the bully was not doing anything that could be classified as ‘wrong’ nothing was done. It’s good and fine to talk about taking harassment seriously, but ALL harassment needs to be part of that equation. Being a bully is a gateway drug into the worse side of harassment.”



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I have been bullied by my immediate supervisor on multiple occasions. My supervisor has used a raised voice and angry body language to stop me from speaking at staff meetings and during one-on-one meetings. My supervisor talks down to me and talks over me so that I cannot get across my thoughts or ideas. My supervisor writes harsh and terse emails to me regarding his position as my supervisor. My supervisor has accused me of actions I did not do without asking if I was responsible for those actions. My second level supervisor (my supervisor's supervisor) has also threatened me with reprisal when I didn't agree with his opinion. This second level supervisor also directed my direct supervisor to give me a letter of counseling because I spoke to other project leaders in my office regarding task assignments and because I and an NPS partner, whom I supervise, had a question regarding this partner's salary. I tried mediation with my direct supervisor, but it was unsuccessful.”

## HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

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I am a transgender employee. Before my transition and during, I endured harassment based on my gender and on my sexual orientation from my peers. I have never experienced it from superiors. As a young seasonal, I had an older, male (married) seasonal kiss me. I have had co-workers talk about gay people in a derogatory and joking way in front of me, knowing that I identified as a lesbian. And later, after I had gone through my transition, I had co-workers joking about gay people trying to get to me. Those co-workers did not understand that sexual orientation and gender identity are two separate things. I was also submitted to derogatory comments about transgender individuals from a park partner, who knew about me and my transition. On the flip side, I had tremendous support from many agency co-workers, including my immediate supervisor and my second line supervisor. While everyone does not have to agree with my life choices, I feel that everyone should be respectful of others in our workplace. I am a resilient person and learned long ago not to let others' opinions of me affect me, but not all are that resilient”

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I have been harassed by two coworkers, one was verbally aggressive towards me and park visitors while the other was attempting inappropriate sexual advancements. With the first instance I felt comfortable bringing the situation to my supervisor, who acted promptly, as I was not the only employee who had negative working experiences with him. With the later situation I was not as quick to open up (at this moment have not told my supervisor, who is on leave until next week), but when I confided in another female employee she told me that he had done similar things to another friend of her at another park. This made me feel more comfortable in bringing the situation up to my supervisor to know that I am not alone with facing this.”

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Some examples of my experience at current park: I had a male co-worker state to me that I must 'choose between working for NPS or being a mother.' (This statement came from a male work leader and father of 3 girls.) I had a male division chief tell me that I should reconsider being Logistics Section Chief on the Incident Management Team because of 'my condition.' (I continued to do both my job and run logistics on the long-term park wide event throughout my 3rd trimester and received Employee of the month award for my role on IMT.) I have had multiple male co-workers make repeated derogatory comments about my parental status and my ability to telework. (I have a supervisor signed telework agreement and I'm in a GS office position and they are all in WG field-based positions. I have received exceptional ratings on EPAPS throughout my time in this position. I am able to perform at a very high level due to my ability to telework and not having to be in the gender biased environment on a daily basis.) My experiences are not isolated incidents. I know several people who have experienced gender-based harassment at GOGA. My experiences are mild in comparison to some of the harassment my female co-workers have experienced.”

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During the recent Fire, after years of service working fire incidents, I was hired to help with logistics. Immediately, I was told I would only be allowed to work 3 days. I requested a uniform and Kevlar items, so I would be like everyone else and was told ‘no’ by the supervisor. I was required to work with diesel fuel, with diesel on my clothes, my shoes, my hands, and not given any Personal Protection Equipment, not even gloves. When I asked, I was told ‘no, just don’t do the work.’ I knew that it was a Catch-22. If I refused to work unprotected with the hazmat, I would be asked to leave. I did the work, and then was accused of badgering, and even eating illegally. I am 70 and am in good health. It is hard to remain enthusiastic about protecting my community and my park.”

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I have been openly criticized for being young and queer. Despite my learning, managing, and growing experience throughout my 8 years with the NPS it seems that I am still not taken seriously, even at the mid-management level because of my gender expression and age.”

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I think the negative and challenging experiences that I have dealt with and continue to deal with (from being a seasonal to now a Superintendent) as an indigenous woman has to do the most with micro-aggressions and unconscious bias. I feel like the NPS is not only biased toward hiring only current NPS employees, but once you are hired, and you have come from a different organization or other background, you are treated differently. I had a supervisor who told me, ‘we think differently in the National Park Service, I know you have difficulty understanding our values because you haven’t always been in the Service.’ This statement made me feel sad and degraded, as though because my views were different, they were lesser, less important and less valuable. Another example is my supervisor saying to me ‘I think because you’re native you give too much preference to what local people think.’ I felt like the strength that I had working with local people was actually thought of as a detriment to the service. I was also not allowed to work on a tribal compact agreement as lead for my park because I was native and because the compact was being negotiated with a tribal non-profit. That was a stinging blow to me and made me wonder why I work for the NPS if I am not trusted to work with other native people. I had to go through an ethics review for this and it was deemed that there were no ethics issues. Recently, I attended a meeting of maintenance supervisors. The meeting was very male dominated. During that meeting, I was: talked down to, had things overexplained to me, talked over and ignored. The bias I believe working in the room was because I was a woman, there was only one or two other women in the room, the rest of the meeting was (25+ people) were men.”



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I have been in the NPS for 34 years and have worked in nine different parks and in at least four regions. I'm a minority, female, with a physical disability which is not obvious. During my entire career including to this day, I have experienced varying sexist comments about my looks from males at all levels of the organization such as, 'I like to see your eyes flash when you get excited' or 'I would rather be talking pleasantries than working since you are most beautiful women in this class' to more sexually explicit comments like, 'I would love to see you dance under a black light' to downright frightening, 'you better not be alone with me because I will rape you.' For the most part, I have become desensitized and barely acknowledge these types of comments anymore. Aging and my high graded position has given me a bit of a reprieve, but they have not stopped completely.”

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More disturbing is that I have also experienced inappropriate physical touching, constant sexual harassment and a hostile work environment for 2 years. The touching included rubbing up against my backside when I picked up the phone and laying an arm across my chest occurred 24 years ago. However, recently a male employee tried to hug me after a meeting I facilitated that he did not even attend! I left the NPS for two years because of the sexual harassment/hostile work environment. I studied conflict in order to heal from the most extreme incident I experienced. Unfortunately, at the time, some of the most senior leaders knew of my plight and did nothing. Yes, most of these folks are retired now so I mention this only to illustrate how pervasive this problem is. Sadly, in a recent meeting with employees, my senior leader downplayed the situation by saying that we don't want to become hypersensitive. This led to a discussion about false reporting of these incidents vs talking about what behaviors are appropriate. This is the same senior leader who told me that he was going to put a bell around my neck, so he could find me in the building. Of course, I laughed this comment off and stated that I wasn't a cow! After I reported the hugging incident he stated that 'you are just not a hugger and I wouldn't worry about it. It didn't mean anything.”

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Then there are the comments regarding my race and questions about why I have advanced in the NPS. These comments all focus on the color of my skin and my gender. Granted when I can identify myself in a bar chart showcasing diversity in the NPS because I'm the only female of Hispanic descent in a region, I'm an easy target. I'm tired of having the same discussions we had 30 years ago about these issues. The agency is still hiring and promoting an overabundance of people who have personal relationships outside work with our senior leaders. How do I know this? I'm told quite frequently about the cocktail parties, dinners, etc. where these discussions are had in some regions. In my park, our senior leader goes out of his way to hire people he knows rather than spending time launching a successful recruitment. The closer relationship he has with the person, the more pressure there is for me to hire the person. These problems are not going to be fixed by policy, training, regulations alone. Each employee, supervisor, manager, senior leader needs to look in the mirror and own the problem. Then everyone needs to commit to doing their part in changing things in a positive, mission driven, unbiased, ethically fashion vs creating additional problems by the way we are handling our current situation.”

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When I was breastfeeding, that same supervisor took away the private office that had come with my position and put me in a shared office with two males, providing me no other area for pumping breast milk as required. My insistence that I was required to be provided a place and time to pump fell on deaf ears. As a result, I had a number of medical issues and my milk started to dry up. My 'dedication' to the workplace was questioned. I was told that it was 'fairer' this way. This situation was more complex than can be addressed here, and many other incidents followed, involving both myself and other employees.”

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## NEED FOR PROACTIVITY AND PREVENTION

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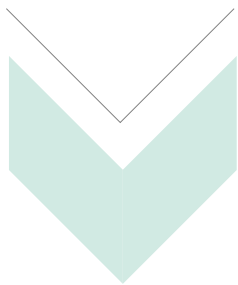
There was a very verbally abusive conflict between my supervisor and another employee at the park. When it first started three years ago I had asked for mediation for the division so that it could be worked through. Nothing was done. My supervisor also consistently showed signs of not being capable of doing her job, abusing her position of authority, and not being mentally stable. I asked numerous times for mediation for this as well and nothing was supplied.”

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The cycle of investigate, propose, decide, grieve, file EEO, investigate, mediate, etc. is too cumbersome and expensive for smaller issues that can persist and lead to bigger problems later. Management needs quicker tools for dealing with minor infractions.”

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My crew a few years ago had an employee that was harassing others, and my supervisor did not address it well enough. After the first incident, I thought he would address it, and he seemed like he believed and supported us, but when there were more and more incidents of threatening and intimidating behavior from this individual, which my crew repeatedly reported, we got pretty discouraged and the work environment became very tense and uncomfortable. I think my supervisor wanted to help but didn't take our concerns as seriously as he should have because my crew leaders are all women who were reporting this. Eventually we had to rearrange our entire work flow schedule to do our best to get any work done...as in, schedule all field and office time so that no person was ever working with this individual in a group of fewer than 3 other people, and making sure that those who were most affected by it did not have to work with the individual in the field. I did not know who else to go to find a solution since my supervisor would not do enough to make the environment safe. How do I go over his head without overstepping my supervisor's role? And how do I make sure that women's concerns are taken as seriously as men's are? This is very challenging for someone in the position of being a woman in a low-level job.”



## SAFETY



My supervisor was the project leader for a helicopter mission but when we went to take off the helicopter wouldn't start. This was a first for us, so it made us think about what we would have to do if we were in a remote area and the helicopter failed to start. We ended up delaying the mission for a day while repairs were done. The next day, without giving us any information on what repairs had been done, and without a pre-flight briefing that's required, our supervisor called us out in front of the pilot and mechanic, asking whether we were "in" or not. He made it clear that if we said, "no," he was going to immediately find someone else to replace us. I think our asking questions about what repairs had been done was taken personally and was viewed as a challenge to his authority. We tried to explain we only wanted to know for safety reasons, but we were bullied into making a decision without having proper background knowledge. My supervisor is a permanent NPS employee for 20+ years and has had years of aviation training, however, you would never would have known that based on his actions. My coworker ended up speaking to him afterward and told him she didn't appreciate being bullied into making a decision and he took that personally as well and didn't speak to her for several weeks (avoiding her at work)."



I felt threatened in park housing by a roommate. My direct supervisor and chief supported my wellbeing. However, the housing manager was not willing to take action. I was told by the housing manager that the park could not intervene or remove someone from housing unless there was physical violence, or another unlawful act. We all live, work, and socialize together. When we do not have a choice of housing or roommates, there needs to be a system in place to deal with difficult situations. This particular roommate disrupted my sleep and made me fearful to be in the house alone with him. Ultimately, I only had two weeks left before the end of my season and stayed with friends. But the issue was never resolved, only forgotten as I left the park. The NPS is unique in the fact that we get to live in unbelievable places. It also means that home and work facets of life are solidly intertwined, and both need to be supported in the workplace. Some parks are fully prepared to deal with this on the immediate supervisory level, others are not."



My work environment is unsafe because, although our visitor facility received 675,000 visitors last year, our law enforcement rangers are always in a district which is 25 miles away because it is busier and neither district has adequate staffing. We have a 45-minute response time for any emergency. This is neither safe nor respectful."





# **NPS VOICES**

# **TOUR 2018**

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## **Storybook**



Prepared by Sepler & Associates for the National Park Service  
Office of Relevancy, Diversity and Inclusion

