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Sen. Paul LeVota of Independence resigns amid sexual harassment accusations



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Sen. Paul LeVota, beset by charges that he sexually harassed legislative interns, resigned from the Missouri legislature Friday evening even as he declared that the accusations were unfounded.

“My conduct has been called into question relating to the intern program in the Missouri Senate and even though there has been no proof of any wrongdoing, the media attention is a distraction to doing the people’s work,” the Independence Democrat said in a Facebook post.

“I did not engage in harassment of any intern in the Missouri Senate and an investigation found no proof of misconduct,” the post continued. “However, I will not put my family, myself, or the Senate through the process of dealing with the veracity of false allegations and character assassination against me.”

He said his resignation would take effect Aug. 23 to give him time to coordinate his office’s transition and to allow Gov. Jay Nixon, who has been critical of LeVota in the context of the allegations, time to call a special election to fill his seat.

His decision to step down came at the end of three days that tossed his political career into a quick collapse.

News had broken several weeks earlier that an investigation was underway into the departure of interns from his office during the spring legislative session. But it wasn’t clear, at least publicly, that he was the subject of sexual harassment complaints.

Then on Wednesday, the Senate administrator released a report on the complaints. That report didn’t make a conclusion on the validity of the charges, but it spelled out details of accusations from former intern Alissa Hembree. The University of Central Missouri student said LeVota propositioned her for sex and alienated her in his office after the incident.

LeVota flatly denied the accusations.

The same day, The Star published interviews with Hembree and another intern, a young woman who also said LeVota had hit on her and then treated her poorly when she worked in his office five years earlier. The second intern’s story prompted a referral of the case Thursday to the Senate’s ethics committee and LeVota’s ouster from that panel.

Those intern accounts prompted criticism of LeVota from politicians across the state, including Nixon and other fellow Democrats.

Then on Friday, The Star published online a story based on a report commissioned by Central Missouri to determine if Hembree had been the victim of sexual harassment.

That report said she was likely solicited for sex by LeVota, violating her civil rights. It sprang from her complaint alleging violations of Title IX — the federal law that protects students in federally funded education programs from harassment and discrimination based on gender.

The Title IX investigation produced the first document that weighed in on the “he said, she said” element of the accusations against LeVota. It said her version withstood scrutiny better than LeVota’s account.

Hembree said that she went with LeVota to a lobbyist event near the Capitol, that he coaxed her to his Jefferson City duplex on the pretext that she’d had too much to drink to drive to her home in Fulton and that he then pressed her for sex.

Hembree told the investigator that LeVota asked her about her sex life, offered her wine, posed questions suggested by a dating app for people beginning a relationship and said what his wife and daughters “don’t know won’t hurt them.”

LeVota denied in the report that he was at the bar with her, that she was ever at his duplex and that he propositioned her.

Other witnesses corroborated her description of LeVota’s duplex and said that they were with both Hembree and LeVota at the event at Gumbo Bottoms near the Capitol.

“The preponderance of the evidence substantiates the investigator’s findings that Senator LeVota directed unwelcome sexual advances and comments toward Ms. Hembree,” wrote Derek Teeter, an attorney hired by the university to look into the matter. “This conduct of a sexual nature ultimately created what would cause a reasonable person to perceive there to be an intimidating or hostile environment that interfered with the complainant’s academic or professional performance.”

The investigator also looked at how Hembree was treated before and after that January night. He concluded her complaints on those counts — she said LeVota sent her inappropriate text messages before and treated her shabbily after that night — were not substantiated.

“My investigation did not uncover substantial evidence that the senator acted with retaliatory animus,” Teeter wrote.

All those conclusions were based on a standard of “whether it is more likely than not that the sexual misconduct occurred.”

Still, the report said she had been harmed because “there was a considerable power disparity that the senator enjoyed over Ms. Hembree by nature of his position that would limit Ms. Hembree’s ability to say ‘no’ to the senator’s proposal.”

That created even more heat on LeVota.

“The new evidence released (Friday) further calls into question Senator LeVota’s fitness for office,” Nixon said in a statement released before LeVota’s resignation became public. After hearing news that LeVota was quitting, the governor’s office said: “This is a necessary step and is in the best interests of his constituents.”

Jackson County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker was part of a group of women on Thursday who had urged the General Assembly to take action against anyone responsible for sexual harassment. She said Friday night that she respected LeVota’s decision to resign.

“We don’t have time to have these kinds of issues control the debate in the legislature,” she said.

Hembree, the intern who accused LeVota of harassment, saw the resignation as a positive step.

“Although he continues to deny all allegations against him, I think this is a great step forward for the Missouri legislature and specifically women who desired a career in Missouri politics,” she said by text message to The Star. “Integrity is key to serving the public. I think this is a great point to start fresh, improve policy and create an environment that fosters professional integrity.”

Missouri Democratic Party Chairman Roy Temple said it was the right move for LeVota and his constituents.

“The cloud that had arisen just made it impossible for him to be effective,” the party leader said.

The allegations against LeVota come several weeks after then House speaker John Diehl, a Republican, quit the legislature in the wake of a sexting scandal with an intern. At least two schools, Central Missouri and Missouri Southern State University, pulled interns out of Jefferson City this spring in the wake of concerns over inappropriate behavior by lawmakers.

And The Star documented a culture of sexual harassment pervasive in the Capitol that left many women saying it was a hostile place for them to work.

The Star's Jason Hancock contributed to this report.

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