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Payne Asked Staffer to Climb on Table to Turn on TV While He Stared From Behind, Told Her "I Love You," Lawsuit Seeking Punitive Damages Says

Lawsuit reveals disturbing claims of workplace misconduct and threats

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Former Senator Steven Payne Sr. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

The legislative staffer who accused former senator Steven Payne of sexual assault, sparking a scandal that eventually led to his expulsion from the V.I. Legislature, has taken her case to the V.I. Superior Court.

In April 2022, Consortium journalists [broke the news](#) that the 34th Legislature was investigating then-Senator Steven Payne following reports from a young staff member that she had been treated inappropriately during a work trip to St. Croix. Following reports of the initial complaint which sparked a preliminary investigation by a legislative committee, two other women came forward, one of whom [repeated allegations](#) that she had made previously but which had never been picked up by press in the Virgin Islands

Amid denials of wrongdoing by Mr. Payne, a third woman contacted Consortium journalists, claiming that she was sexually assaulted by the former law enforcement officer turned lawmaker [while she was still a minor](#).

With a chorus of political and civil society organizations [calling for his ouster](#), a defiant Payne was finally expelled from the Senate in July of 2022. He has since filed suit against the 34th Legislature and its president Senator Donna Frett-Gregory in a matter that came before the Supreme Court for oral argument on Tuesday.

In the time since his removal from office, Mr. Payne was also arrested in Florida, [charged with sexually assaulting a minor](#) in a case whose details bear striking similarity to earlier reports published in the Consortium.

Now, the woman who arguably began this cascade of consequences has broken her silence in her quest for justice. Dene Dessuit is the young staffer in Mr. Payne's former Senate office who says that she was subjected to a campaign of sexual harassment by the expelled legislator. In her complaint, filed late February, she says that she had only been on the job for three weeks when she received a telephone call from Mr. Payne.

On the call, he reportedly expressed pleasure at having her work with him in his office, and assured her of a promotion within six months if she maintained her excellent work performance. Although she found the call strange, Ms. Dessuit said she ultimately dismissed it as meaningless.

Having started the job in January of 2021, Ms. Dessuit said that by April Mr. Payne had begun commenting on her appearance, telling her that she could become a model. In August of that year, he accused her of being distracted from her work because of a romantic relationship with a maintenance worker in the Legislature. That distraction, the former senator argued, had caused her to schedule him in a meeting for a committee he did not belong to. After learning that Ms. Dessuit had not put the meeting into his calendar, nor had she become involved with the maintenance worker, Mr. Payne reportedly nevertheless threatened her with suspension for wrongdoing.

The lawsuit also alleges that the former senator informed her she was not able to quit, promising to handcuff her to the desk if she tried to do so. By that time, Mr. Payne's abusive conduct towards Ms. Dessuit caused her to seek the services of a therapist, she claims.

The conduct continued as the months went on, the lawsuit claims, describing incidents when Mr. Payne would reportedly call Ms. Dessuit into his office. Although she often wore skirts and dresses to work, the 6'3" former lawmaker would reportedly ask her to stand on a table and turn on the television, staring at her from behind his desk as she stretched and reached up to the TV.

In November 2021, the at-large senator reportedly began telling his young staffer that he loved her when they were alone in the office, punctuating his remarks by making kissing noises with his mouth.

The incidents, which would later draw public scrutiny to Mr. Payne's history of reportedly harassing and assaulting women in proximity to him, occurred on February 28, 2022. The lawsuit corroborates previous reporting from the Consortium that following a Senate committee meeting on St. Croix, Ms. Dessuit was traveling with Mr. Payne to get some food when he suggested that the two stay in the same hotel room to allegedly "save the Legislature money."

Upon arriving at the hotel where they were staying, Mr. Payne, who had apparently checked in the day prior, reportedly took Ms. Dessuit's bag and walked up the stairs while she was at the front desk waiting for her room key. Ignoring her requests, he allegedly took the bag into his room, and when she followed him hoping to retrieve it, he waved her into his room and reportedly told her to "get comfortable," indicating the side of the bed where he allegedly wanted her to sleep.

Ms. Dessuit said that after she managed to escape the room, she spoke about what had happened to a coworker with whom she often discussed what the lawsuit says was a toxic work environment in the office. She then reportedly received a call from the former senator instructing her to come back to the room to ensure that she had latched the door properly, and ignored two subsequent calls that evening.

The lawsuit also alleges that other legislative staff mishandled information relating to Ms. Dessuit's sexual harassment allegations. She claims that the assistant Executive Director Marisel Castor, named as a defendant in the suit, made notes of a conversation that they had had regarding Mr. Payne, which were subsequently read by an unnamed third party. After confiding in Ms. Castor, Ms. Dessuit was placed on paid administrative leave.

Ms. Dessuit was told that Mr. Payne would be informed of the investigation, a development she felt violated her rights. Following that, information about the investigation were leaked to the press. Despite her identity being withheld, employees within the legislature quickly determined that she was the likely accuser.

While on administrative leave, Ms. Dessuit was removed from office communications channels and only learned of the investigation's escalation to the Committee on Ethical Conduct and Mr. Payne's eventual expulsion from the legislature through reports in the media.

After his removal from office, the lawsuit claims that while Mr. Payne's other staff members were offered transfers or reassignments with his replacement, Ms. Dessuit was not given similar consideration. Instead, according to then-Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory, also named as a defendant, she would remain on paid administrative leave until the tenure of the 34th Legislature came to an end on January 9, 2023.

The lawsuit accuses Mr. Payne of assault, breach of peace, false imprisonment, and defamation. Mr. Payne, Ms. Castor, Senator Frett-Gregory, and the Legislature as a whole are accused of invasion of privacy, and intentional and negligent infliction of emotional distress. She is seeking a jury trial in pursuit of compensatory and punitive damages against all parties for the personal injury, mental anguish, and other pain and suffering caused as a result of her ordeal.