

Investigators are being sent to US research base on Antarctica to look into sexual violence concerns

November 3 2023, by Nick Perry



This undated image supplied by the National Science Foundation, shows Renée Ferranti. The NSF announced Friday, Nov. 3, 2023 it is appointing Ferranti as a new special assistant to the NSF director to focus on sexual assault and harassment prevention, as well as response implementation. Credit: National Science Foundation via AP

The watchdog office overseeing the National Science Foundation is sending investigators to Antarctica's McMurdo Station after hearing concerns about the prevalence of sexual violence at the U.S. research base.

Meanwhile the NSF, a federal agency, said it's furthering its own efforts to address the "pervasive problem." It announced Friday it is appointing Renée Ferranti as a special assistant to the NSF director to focus on sexual [assault](#) and harassment prevention and response.

An Associated Press investigation in August uncovered a pattern of women at McMurdo Station who said their claims of harassment or assault were minimized by their employers, often leading to them or others being put in further danger.

Internal communications obtained by the AP indicated the NSF Office of Inspector General would send investigators for a site visit from Monday through Nov. 17.

"We are in the process of expanding our investigative mission to include the investigation of criminal violations that occur in Antarctica," Lisa Vonder Haar, the chief of staff for the OIG, wrote in an email to the AP confirming the visit. "Such violations include aggravated [sexual abuse](#), sexual abuse, abusive sexual contact, and stalking."

Vonder Haar said its special agents have been responding remotely to complaints from workers in Antarctica since July and it plans to have a presence on the ice during future summers.

The AP investigation detailed the lack of support many women felt from those running the Antarctic program. One woman felt compelled to carry a hammer with her at all times for protection. Another woman who reported a colleague had groped her was made to work alongside him

again.

In another case, a woman who told her employer she was sexually assaulted was fired two months later. A fourth woman said that bosses at the base downgraded her allegations from rape to harassment.

A 2022 NSF report found 59% of women said they'd experienced harassment or assault while on the ice. Alcohol was a factor in some cases.

In October, the NSF decided to [stop serving alcohol](#) at McMurdo Station's bars, although workers can still buy a weekly alcohol ration from the station store. The NSF told the AP the alcohol changes were related to morale and welfare, and were not aimed at preventing sexual harassment or assault.

On Friday, NSF Director Sethuraman Panchanathan said he was delighted to welcome Ferranti, who had more than 25 years of experience in sexual assault prevention.

"Addressing this pervasive problem remains a top priority for me and the agency, and with Renée's expertise we will continue to adapt and further accelerate our efforts to address the evolving landscape of [sexual assault](#) prevention and response," Panchanathan said in a statement.

Ferranti said in the release she hopes "to make a meaningful impact to advance NSF's progress in addressing sexual violence."

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