

## MICHIGAN

# Former Michigan female prisoners settle sexual assault claims for \$495,000



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Detroit Free Press

July 7, 2021, 6:02 a.m. ET

LANSING – Two women who were sexually assaulted by a storekeeper while incarcerated at Michigan's only prison for women have settled their suit against state officials for \$495,000, their attorney said.

U.S. District Judge Laurie Michelson declared the 2018 lawsuit settled Tuesday.

Michelson's order did not disclose the terms of the settlement. But Deborah Gordon, a Bloomfield Hills attorney who represented the two former prisoners, said the state has agreed to pay \$495,000. Chris Gautz, a spokesman for the Michigan Department of Corrections, confirmed that amount.

"Protecting female prisoners from assault by male employees requires a great deal of vigilance," Gordon said. "We hope that this case and outcome have raised awareness once again."

Corrections Department officials admitted no wrongdoing.

Norman Laughlin, 55, of Milan, a storekeeper who worked in the warehouse at Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility near Ypsilanti, was sentenced in September to 90 days in jail and five years of probation and required to register as a sex offender after he pleaded "no contest" to two counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct. A defendant pleading no contest — which is treated like a guilty plea at sentencing — neither admits nor disputes the charges.

Laughlin's 2020 conviction for offenses in 2016 and 2017 showed that sexual abuse continued at Women's Huron Valley even after the state in 2009 agreed to pay \$100 million to settle lawsuits alleging systematic harassment and abuse by male corrections offices against female prisoners.

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The lawsuit heard evidence that in addition to sharply restricting the use of male officers in the living areas of the prison, the state installed more than 1,400 cameras — far more than are in place at any other state prison — in the wake of the historic settlement.

But the prison warehouse, where Laughlin worked and repeatedly abused and harassed female prisoners, had no cameras until 2016, after which it had only four cameras and many blind spots, according to evidence in the case.

Laughlin, who was not involved in the abuse that led to the 2009 settlement, groped women's breasts and genital areas, invited them to masturbate, slapped their butts, exposed himself and made offensive sexual comments, according to evidence in the case. Female prisoners called him by his first name and he ate lunch with the prisoners and was friends with prisoners and former prisoners on Facebook. The most recent reported abuse was in January 2018, when one of the women testified Laughlin tweaked her nipple and exposed himself to her.

The Free Press has documented a litany of problems at the women's prison, including overcrowding, leaky roofs and a scabies outbreak that raged through the prison for about a year before prison officials properly diagnosed and treated it.

Michelson ruled in February that the two women Laughlin was convicted of sexually assaulting [could proceed with their lawsuit against him and three supervisors.](#)

A reasonable jury could find that Toni Moore, the prison business manager who supervised the warehouse and other areas, and former wardens Anthony Stewart and Shawn Brewer "were deliberately indifferent to a substantial risk that Laughlin was sexually abusing female prisoners," Michelson wrote in a 46-page opinion.

Michelson dismissed claims against former Gov. Rick Snyder, department Director Heidi Washington and four other MDOC officials who she found were not in a position to know about Laughlin's abuse.

Laughlin joined the department in 2000 and worked at the women's prison from 2009 until January 2018, when he was suspended. Laughlin was fired in August 2018, according to evidence in the case.

Neither woman reported the abuse to anyone at the Corrections Department while they were prisoners. They were released in 2018 and 2019.

But Michelson found that some prison officials had evidence on which they could have acted sooner.

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