#ChescoActs - What Next?

It’s hard to remember that only a year ago we came together for the #ChescoKnows Summit, presented in partnership by the Chester County Women’s Commission and the Chester County Fund for Women and Girls, to highlight the results of the #ChescoKnows Workplace Sexual Harassment survey. This event set the stage for #ChescoActs, our campaign to continue to build momentum and foster change around this issue by turning dialogue into action, which was set to launch the week of March 16, 2020. Obviously, we paused the campaign as our entire community and society had to focus on COVID-19.

Since that time, our world has shifted as we navigate quarantines, workplace changes, closures, job loss, and serious health risks in response to COVID-19, and find ourselves in the midst of another historic reckoning- addressing of the systemic inequities that the virus has exposed.

COVID-19 has provided a window into the epidemics of poverty, racism, and the gender and economic inequalities in our communities. We must acknowledge and focus urgent attention on the intersectionality of these overwhelming issues, and in our role, on the particular impacts on women. We are conscious of the inequities at home, with parents struggling to be full-time childcare providers, home-school teachers, and mental health caregivers, even as they try to meet their work responsibilities. For the nation’s 11 million single parents- most of them women- it has become nearly impossible to care for children while juggling a job.

We also acknowledge that it is important to remain attentive to those that continue to face sexual harassment. The reality is that the COVID-19 crisis puts many workers at greater risk of harassment and workplace abuse. The existing inequities and economic insecurities that increase risk of harassment and violence at work, school and home have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Without a safety net, many workers are desperate to keep a paycheck at any cost and less willing to report harassment, increasing the risk of abuse.

The #MeToo movement started as a reckoning led by survivors and women of color that called on all of us to name sexual violence and harassment as unacceptable and intolerable. In Chester County, we confirmed that sexual harassment is real in our very own community by educating ourselves on the prevalence and personal stories of those impacted.

We are committed to continued action as we navigate a rapidly changing work environment and look forward to providing opportunities to create healthy and safe workplace environments for all in Chester County. In the coming months, we will provide updates and insights about the challenges being faced and addressed by women in our community. The momentum toward a more equitable Chester County must continue.

From the employer’s perspective, employees who are “out of sight” should not be “out of mind.” It is critical that managers and human resource professionals communicate to employees that sexual harassment of any kind is not tolerated, and that this includes harassment that occurs in any virtual format. Employee handbooks should be updated to include zero-tolerance policies related to virtual harassment, with specific examples of behavior that is inappropriate. Employees should be given clear guidance on how to report such harassment, including contact information of managers or human resource professionals.
For employees who face virtual sexual harassment, it is critical that they feel comfortable coming forward to report the harassment. And this may be facilitated by the fact that most virtual harassment will leave a written or recorded data trail to assist with reporting. If the workplace is unresponsive, employees should reach out to their local EEOC office to discuss the situation. The EEOC can help employees file a sexual harassment charge if the circumstances are warranted.

As with all employee relations issues, open communication is the key to creating healthy, harassment-free virtual workplaces.