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Home / News / Best States / West Virginia News

Former W. Virginia Prison Guard Settles 3 Sex Abuse Lawsuits

A former correctional officer in West Virginia has settled three lawsuits by women who say he sexually abused them while they were inmates.

By Associated Press, Wire Service Content Jan. 2, 2020

HUNTINGTON, W.VA. (AP) — A former correctional officer in West Virginia has settled three lawsuits by women who say he sexually abused them while they were inmates.

Former guard James Widen agreed to settle the cases for a total of \$240,000, the women's attorney and state Sen. Mike Woelfel told the The Charleston Gazette-Mail.

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Widen abused the women while they were under his supervision at the now-closed Work Release Center in Huntington, according to the lawsuits. The lawsuits allege women at the facility were subjected to sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation by indifferent correctional staff. Widen would make sexual comments to the women and proposition them before ultimately forcing them to have sex with him, the lawsuits say.

Widen was indicted in 2018 on charges of imposition of sexual acts on people incarcerated or under supervision. A hearing in that case is set for February.

Such sexual misconduct is underreported, said Woelfel, who noted that he had represented more than 100 women who reported being sexually abused while incarcerated.

“They’re told ‘nobody’s going to believe you,’ ” Woelfel said. “They can put posters on the wall and say to call this number, but there’s a stigma that goes with that in the prison population.”

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