

Gov.'s campaign settles with ex-spokesman

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SANTA FE — Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham’s gubernatorial campaign has paid at least \$62,500 as part of a settlement with a former staff member who had accused her of sexual mistreatment during a staff meeting, according to documents filed Monday.

The payments went to a law firm representing James Hallinan, a spokesman for Lujan Grisham during her 2018 general election campaign.

The five monthly payments of \$12,500 are outlined in a campaign finance report filed late Monday by Lujan Grisham’s campaign with the Secretary of State’s Office. They are listed as legal expenses, with one payment a month from November through March.

It wasn’t clear Monday how many payments might also be made in future months as part of the settlement agreement.

In a written statement Monday, campaign spokesman Jared Leopold said the payments are part of a settlement resolving “numerous dubious and disputed potential claims made by Mr. Hallinan arising from his employment in 2018 with the campaign organization and his subsequent search for employment.”

Hallinan, who now runs his own communications company, accused Lujan Grisham in late 2019 — about a year after he left the campaign — of pouring a bottle of water on his crotch and then grabbing his crotch through his clothes as she laughed, an incident he said took place in front of other campaign staffers.

Hallinan said he was talked out of reporting the incident by Lujan Grisham campaign manager Dominic Gabello, who is now a senior adviser in the Governor's Office.

Leopold said Monday that the settlement was reached to avoid the distraction and cost of litigation.

Lujan Grisham, Gabello and the campaign organization itself “strenuously deny that there is any merit or truth to Mr. Hallinan's claims, including his claims about difficulty finding or keeping work after the campaign,” Leopold said. “They reached a settlement in order to avoid the continuing distraction and significant expense of possible litigation and allow them to concentrate on working for the people of New Mexico during this pandemic.”

Settlement payments were made to the Buckley Beal law firm in Atlanta, where Rachel Berlin Benjamin, an attorney for Hallinan, is senior partner.

She said Monday that the governor and Hallinan “have resolved any differences or issues to their satisfaction.”

“I am not able to provide any further information,” she said.

Hallinan has worked for years in New Mexico politics — both on campaigns and for public agencies. Before joining the Lujan Grisham campaign, he worked for Democratic Attorney General Hector Balderas.

Hallinan made his allegations public on Christmas morning 2019 with a tweet: “A governor ... is not above the law for her sexual and physical abuse of employees including (me!!!) I'll talk more when I return to the country.”

The next day, a Lujan Grisham spokeswoman called the allegations bizarre, slanderous and false and said the other staffers present during the meeting referenced by Hallinan say the alleged wrongdoing didn't happen.

Monday was one of just two campaign reporting deadlines for 2021, an off year for statewide elections.

Among the other filings were:

– Balderas, now in his second term as attorney general, reported \$676,000 cash on hand, after raising \$22,500 in donations during the period.

– Sen. Crystal Diamond, R-Elephant Butte, reported about \$33,400 in her account after spending about \$7,000 in the reporting period. She won one of the most expensive and fiercely contested legislative races of 2020 to flip control of a southern New Mexico district.