

FEWER SEXUAL VIOLENCE CASES BEING INVESTIGATED



JOSE LUIS MAGANA, ASSOCIATED PRESS

The U.S. Department of Education building is seen in Washington on Nov. 18, 2024.

Education Dept. hit by Trump's layoffs, shifting priorities

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Before President Donald Trump's administration started dismantling the Education Department, the agency served as a powerful enforcer in cases of sexual violence at schools and universities. It brought the weight of the government against schools that mishandled sexual assault complaints involving students.

That work is quickly fading away.

The department's Office for Civil Rights was gutted in Trump's mass layoffs last year, leaving half as many lawyers to investigate complaints of discrimination based on race, sex or disability in schools. Those who remain face a backlog of more than 25,000 cases.

Investigations have dwindled. Before the layoffs last March, the office opened dozens of sexual violence investigations a year. Since then, it's opened fewer than 10 nationwide, according to internal data obtained by The Associated Press.

Yet Trump's Republican administration has doubled down on sexual discrimination cases of another kind. Trump officials have used Title IX, a 1972 gender equality law, against schools that make accommodations for transgender students and athletes. The Office for Civil Rights has opened nearly 50 such investigations since Trump took office a year ago.

Even before the layoffs, critics said the office was understaffed and moved too slowly. Now, many firms that handle Title IX cases have stopped filing complaints,

calling it a dead end.

An Education Department spokesperson said the office is working through its caseload, blaming President Joe Biden's Democratic administration for leaving a backlog and rewriting Title IX rules to protect LGBTQ+ students. Trump officials rolled back those rules.

Students have few other places to turn

The layoffs have slowed work at the Office for Civil Rights across the board, but it has an outside impact on cases of sexual violence. Students who are mistreated by their schools — including victims and accused students alike — have few other venues to pursue justice.

One woman said she's losing hope for a complaint she filed in 2024. She alleges her graduate school failed to follow its own policies when it suspended but didn't expel another student found by the school to have sexually assaulted her. No one has contacted her about the complaint since 2024.

The woman recently sued her school as a last resort. She said it feels like a David and Goliath mismatch.

"They have all the power, because there is no large organization holding them accountable. It's just me, just this one individual who's filing this simple suit," the woman said. The AP does not typically identify people who say they are victims of sexual assault unless they grant permission.

The civil rights office is supposed to provide a free alternative to litigation. Anyone can file a complaint, which can trigger an investigation and sanctions for schools that violate federal law.

In 2024, the agency received more than 1,000 complaints involving sexual violence or sexual harassment, according to an annual report.

It's unclear how many complaints have been filed more recently. Trump's administration has not reported newer figures.

In December, the department acknowledged the civil rights backlog and announced dozens of downsized workers would be brought back to the office amid a legal challenge to their layoffs. The workers' return offers some hope to those with pending civil rights complaints. Department officials have vowed to keep pushing for the layoffs.

Historically, feds have held schools accountable

Before Trump was elected to his second term, the office had more than 300 pending investigations involving sexual assault, according to a public database. Most of those cases are believed to be sitting idle as investigators prioritize easier complaints, according to staffers who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution.

The details of past cases underscore the urgency of the work.

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Casey's enters Waco market, converts 2 Cefco locations

BY BLAKE HOLLINGSWORTH
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Casey's, a chain of more than 2,900 convenience stores in 19 states, has moved into Waco, taking over two former Cefco stores.

Casey's converted stores at 3001 Gholson Road and 6201 Bagby Ave. in Waco, after recent conversions in Killeen and Nolanville. Milano, Temple and Lampasas locations will follow, according to a company press release.

"Our growth in Texas is an exciting chapter for Casey's as we welcome new guests, team members and communities into Casey's Country," Casey's Chief

Operating Officer Ena Williams said in the press release. "At Casey's, our purpose is to make life better for our communities and guests every day, and we look forward to serving our new neighbors."

The Central Texas conversions follow the company's \$1.2 billion acquisition of Fikes Wholesale, which closed in November and added nearly 150 stores in Texas.

Casey's said guests can expect fuel, convenience items and freshly prepared food, including its signature pizza, along with sandwiches, bakery items and coffee.

As part of its Texas expansion, Casey's will make a \$1,000

donation to a local nonprofit for each new store it opens in the state. The company said its community support focuses on education, hunger relief and organizations serving first responders, veterans and their families.

Casey's previously converted Texas convenience stores in Covington, Granbury, Gun Barrel City and Paris. The company operates more than 2,900 stores across 19 states, and according to a Barron's article published last month, Casey's stock has doubled since early 2024, with earnings per share projected to jump more than 15% in fiscal year 2026.



BLAKE HOLLINGSWORTH, TRIBUNE-HERALD

A Casey's store at 6201 Bagby Ave. is one of two former Cefco locations the 19-state chain has taken over in Waco. The other is at Gholson Road and Lake Shore Drive.