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August 18, 2015

Representative Bill Kidd
District 20, Missouri General Assembly
Missouri House of Representatives
201 West Capitol Avenue
Room 201-E
Jefferson City, MO 65101

Dear Representative Kidd:

Victim-blaming in the context of sexual violence is as old as the crime itself. I saw victims blamed for the crimes against them as a courtroom prosecutor of sex crimes, and as elected prosecutor for Jackson County.

I saw young women held responsible for the harm done to them by others. I even saw a few law enforcement officials sometimes unwilling to pursue justice because of the victim's behavior prior to the crime. "She was asking for it," is a sentence I have longed to see stripped from our cultural vocabulary.

Victim-blaming obscures justice, and undermines a process that should be based solely on factual evidence, not on a desire to skirt accountability.

And so I was bitterly disappointed to read press accounts of your suggestions that, as policies are developed to better protect interns working in the Missouri State Legislature from sexual harassment and assault, you thought an intern dress code was the answer.

Such a recommendation reeks of a desire to avoid holding fully accountable those who would prey upon young women and men seeking to begin honorable careers in public service. Is your recommendation meant to suggest that the ability of adult men and women who have been elected to govern the state of Missouri to control themselves is contingent on the attire of the teenagers and young adults working in their offices? Is your recommendation meant to suggest that if an intern wears suggestive clothing, she or he will share partial responsibility for any potential sexual harassment or assault?

I approach this issue as a former prosecutor of sex crimes, a U.S. Senator who is working to curb sexual violence on a national scale, and as a mother and grandmother. I also approach it as a former Missouri state legislator --and previous to that, a former intern in the Missouri State Legislature who confronted sexual harassment from male legislators.

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As I have said of those times, I am not sure that I handled the harassment correctly. I believe younger generations of women and men are growing stronger in the face of such unacceptable behavior—including recent interns working in the State Legislature who have spoken out and held powerful legislators to account.

I am immeasurably proud of those young women. And I refuse to stand by idly while any suggestion is made that victims of sexual harassment in the Missouri State Legislature is the responsibility of anyone other than the legislators themselves. It is the responsibility of you and your colleagues to uphold the law, protect the young people working in our state's capital, and confront and change a culture that excuses sexual violence. This problem has nothing to do with how interns are dressed.

I ask that you clarify or withdraw your suggestion of a dress code for interns as a means of combatting sexual harassment—and that you redouble your efforts to confront the real and systemic causes of such behavior.

Sincerely,

Claire McCaskill
United States Senator