

Brennan: 'At each turn, my pleas for help went unanswered'



If she can't get justice, Katie Brennan, the chief of staff at the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, said "I don't know who can get justice." | AP Photo/Mel Evans

By **RYAN HUTCHINS**

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TRENTON — A top official in the administration of New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy told state lawmakers on Tuesday that she felt ignored and let down as she tried, repeatedly, to get someone to address her accusations of rape against another high-ranking state employee.

Katie Brennan, a state housing official who says she was sexually assaulted in April 2017 by Al Alvarez, then a top aide on Murphy's campaign, said she contacted at least four state officials, an attorney for Murphy's campaign and the governor himself as she sought justice.

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Through it all, Brennan said, she thought help was around the corner, but it never arrived. The Hudson County Prosecutor's Office refused to charge Alvarez. The governor's transition team, told that Alvarez faced such an allegation, went ahead and hired him as chief of staff at a state agency. The state's chief ethics officer said she couldn't fire Alvarez. The campaign attorney said Alvarez would leave the state soon, then he didn't.

In the end, the only thing that worked, Brennan said, was a call to a reporter for the Wall Street Journal. What does that mean, Brennan wondered aloud, for sexual assault victims who don't work at the top echelons of government?

"I and no survivor should have to tell their story to the newspaper to be heard. I had access to people in the highest positions of power in the state of New Jersey, and at each turn, my pleas for help went unanswered," Brennan, steely and dispassionate, told the state Legislative Select Oversight Committee during four hours of testimony.

“Somehow, it wasn’t a priority to address my sexual assault ... until it impacted them,” she said.

Brennan, chief of staff at the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency and a former volunteer on Murphy’s gubernatorial campaign, was the first to testify before the new joint legislative committee.

The lawmakers, drawn from both the state Senate and Assembly and armed with subpoena power, are charged with looking into how Brennan’s case was handled and whether broad deficiencies exist in how the state hires political appointees and how it responds to accusations like hers.

The inquiry, the first of the New Jersey governor’s office since aides to Chris Christie were caught closing lanes to the George Washington Bridge in 2013, could erode the reputation that Murphy, a liberal Democrat, has sought to build as a champion of women.

Brennan’s testimony — delivered under oath — has raised questions about whether Murphy’s top people properly handled the accusations and why the governor himself did not try to find out why he had been contacted this past June about a “sensitive matter.”

Top lawmakers said their curiosity is piqued.

“I would say that, at least on some levels, there seemed to be a curious lack of asking about the details,” Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg, a Democrat and co-chair of the committee, told reporters after the hearing ended.

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The committee plans to meet again Dec. 18, but it's unclear who will testify.

In a statement Tuesday afternoon, Murphy said he watched some of Brennan's testimony and commended her for her "courage."

"I watched Ms. Brennan's opening statement today, and I commend the courage, bravery and leadership she showed in telling her story," Murphy said. "She is right: No one should have to go through an ordeal to have their voices heard. We must stand with survivors of sexual assault, and we must start from a place of believing the accuser."

Murphy also detailed some of the steps his administration is taking in response, including calling for two separate internal investigations into the hire and asking his attorney general to implement new policies for sexual assault victims.

"I am committed to working with Attorney General [Gurbir] Grewal and the whole of state government to ensure that New Jersey is a place where justice is

the right of every person, and every person is treated with dignity and respect while seeking it,” Murphy said.

In an opening statement that lasted about 20 minutes, Brennan talked about what happened after Alvarez, who later became chief of staff at the Schools Development Authority, allegedly sexually assaulted her on April 8, 2017, after a gathering of campaign supporters at a bar in Jersey City. Alvarez’s attorney has denied the allegations to the Journal.

Before she called the Jersey City Police Department to report the alleged assault, Brennan told Justin Braz, a “personal friend” who is now Murphy’s deputy chief of staff for legislative affairs, about what happened. She said Braz was starting to get involved in the Murphy campaign.

“I needed someone who knew Mr. Alvarez to know what happened,” Brennan said. “I knew that if I were to continue to pursue my career in housing and government in New Jersey — continue to be involved in the Murphy campaign for governor — I would inevitably cross paths with Mr. Alvarez, who was then working as the director of Muslim and Latino outreach for the campaign. I needed support and protection.”

Brennan reported the alleged assault to the police and later went to Jersey City Medical Center, where she was examined for sexual assault. She wrote a letter to Alvarez recounting what she says he did to her, mailed it to the Murphy campaign office in Newark and then reported her accusations to the Hudson County Prosecutor’s Office.

As law enforcement continued to investigate, Brennan formally joined Murphy’s campaign in August 2017, accepting a volunteer position as a policy adviser on the economy, jobs and antipoverty working group.

“I continued to work for the Murphy campaign because I did not want to let the assault stand in the way of me working for the campaign and Governor Murphy’s administration,” Brennan said. “As a victim of sexual assault, I should not be the one to give up my career goals in favor of the career goals of

She was still hopeful Alvarez would be charged.

But the months ticked by, Murphy won the election and no case had yet been brought.

Alvarez, meanwhile, had been named personnel director for Murphy's transition — potentially in a position to decide whether Brennan should get a job in the new administration. Brennan's attorney wrote a letter to Alvarez asking him to recuse himself if her application landed in front him, but received no response.

Then the Hudson County Prosecutor's Office told Brennan it was close to wrapping up the case, and she thought it meant Alvarez would be charged. She thought Murphy's aides needed to know, so she asked Braz to alert the transition.

Braz, she said, spoke to the transition counsel but did not mention her name.

“Justin reported that Al Alvarez had raped somebody. That's my understanding,” Brennan said, adding that she believed the counsel was led to believe the accuser “was somebody on the inside, but I don't think they knew exactly.”

Brennan said she was surprised when Braz said the counsel didn't want any more details.

“If they had wanted to ask me questions — if they wanted to follow up — I think they could have gotten me,” she said.

She then learned the prosecutor's office wouldn't bring charges because it didn't think a jury would convict.

"There are no words to describe the hollowness and the disappointment I felt," she said.

Since the Wall Street Journal published its interview with Brennan in October, the state attorney general has asked the Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office to review the criminal case. The office has not yet reported its findings.

Defeated and upset, Brennan said, she still "hoped for justice in another form."

"It never came," she said.

Despite her effort to alert transition leaders — details that reached the man who is now Murphy's chief of staff — Alvarez was hired for his position at the SDA. Brennan said she saw Alvarez again on numerous occasions, including at Murphy's inaugural ball.

Brennan said she couldn't let that be the end of things and was "determined that I must directly alert the administration."

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So, on March 20, she met Matt Platkin — a friend and the governor's chief counsel — at a cheese and wine bar in Jersey City. They chatted about mundane things and some "wonky" policy issues. And then she told him about Alvarez.

“Mr. Platkin was horrified, and said he would contact the attorney general’s office to see if anything could be done,” Brennan testified. “So I was filled with hope.”

Two days later, she said, she told Murphy’s deputy counsel, Parimal Garg, another friend. He said he was sorry.

In April, Platkin — who, unbeknownst to Brennan, had recused himself — told SDA Chief Executive Charlie McKenna, Alvarez’s supervisor, that Alvarez should “separate himself” from the state government, a senior administration official had previously told POLITICO.

McKenna told the Wall Street Journal he conveyed the message, and that Alvarez said he would start searching for a new job, but no timeline was set. “He wasn’t being fired, he wasn’t being ordered to leave,” McKenna told the newspaper. “It was just a conversation where I said, ‘I was told that this would be a good idea.’”

On April 24, Brennan said, she was contacted by Heather Taylor, the chief ethics officer in the governor’s office, who delivered another sobering dose of news: Because the alleged rape occurred when neither Brennan nor Alvarez worked for the state, there was nothing she could do.

“Once again, I saw no justice,” she said. “Once again, my voice was not heard.”

It was after that when Brennan decided to contact Murphy and his wife, Tammy Murphy, who in January had said publicly that she had been sexually assaulted in college. Brennan said she discussed what happened with Julie Roginsky, a former Murphy political adviser who had been one of the architects of his campaign. Roginsky gave Brennan the personal email addresses for the governor and first lady.

On June 1, nearly 14 months after the alleged attack, Brennan drafted an email with the subject line “Sensitive Matter-Meeting Request,” and sent it at 7 p.m. A copy of the exchange was previously provided to POLITICO and was read aloud during Tuesday’s hearing.

“Reluctantly, I am coming to you today to discuss something that happened during the campaign. If possible, I would like to meet with either of you one on

one for this sensitive matter,” Brennan wrote after reintroducing herself.

“Thank you for your consideration.”

The governor wrote back 41 minutes later, addressing Brennan by her first name.

“We know you well,” he wrote. “Adding our respective teams to get on with scheduling something. Hang in. We are on it. If we prove not to be fast enough don’t hesitate to come back to Tammy or me directly. Many thanks. Phil and
T. M.”

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The governor copied two staff administrative assistants on the email, but no meeting was scheduled.

Murphy has previously said he was unaware of what Brennan wanted to discuss but, following advice that he can’t meet with everyone and needs to delegate, referred the matter to his campaign counsel.

Brennan received a phone call from Jonathan Berkon, a Murphy campaign lawyer who, she said, knew immediately what she wanted to discuss.

“I told him nothing. He told me Mr. Alvarez was leaving the administration,” Brennan said. “I never mentioned Mr. Alvarez. Someone told him what the issue was.”

Berkon later followed up with Brennan and her attorney, but wouldn’t discuss any details about Alvarez leaving. “That’s when he told us it was an HR matter, and that he could not tell me why Mr. Alvarez was leaving the administration,” Brennan recalled during her testimony.

Berkon did not respond to an email seeking comment on Tuesday; his automatic response said he was traveling for work.

Despite the assurances, Alvarez remained on the job into September, and Brennan gave up on any hope Murphy’s people would handle the matter. She decided to contact the newspaper.

Alvarez resigned Oct. 2, the same day the Journal contacted him and the governor’s office seeking comment.

“I had incredible access,” Brennan told lawmakers. “When you watch door after door close — doors you never thought you would get to or have to get to — it’s really demoralizing.”

If she can’t get justice, she said, “I don’t know who can get justice.”

Matt Friedman contributed to this report.

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