

Former Ohio House Democrats' attorney alleges gender discrimination, retaliation in federal complaint

By **Jeremy Pelzer**
Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio—A former attorney for the Ohio House Democrats claims in a federal anti-discrimination report that she was forced from her job after complaining that female legislative staffers were being paid less and disciplined more than their male colleagues.

Sarah Cherry, the House Democrats' legal counsel from 2010 until July 2023, claimed that she was pressured by House Minority Leader Allison Russo into resigning after refusing to stop her complaints to House administrators. She complained that the Ohio House paid women less than men and that the House's human-resources director took harsher disciplinary measures against women.

Cherry filed [the complaint](#) last March with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. But late last month, Cherry publicized the complaint for the first time in an email to 32 House Democratic lawmakers, unsuccessfully asking them not to re-elect Russo, a Columbus-area Democrat, as minority leader when the new legislative session starts next week.

"After two years of silence, it's time to speak out," Cherry stated in her email to lawmakers.

Cherry said in an interview that once her federal discrimination complaint is resolved she will likely file a federal civil-rights lawsuit over the matter.

[In a written response](#) to Cherry's federal complaint, Ohio House lawyer Kasey Bond denied Cherry's claims of discrimination. Russo also denied them in an email to Democratic lawmakers and staff. An independent investigation conducted in 2023 on behalf of the Ohio House concluded that none of Cherry's allegations about gender discrimination were substantiated.

Cherry was fired, Bond stated, because she stopped doing her job duties as she “became singularly focused” on getting these disciplinary notices erased (a claim Cherry disputes).

Cherry’s allegations

Between 2020 and 2022, Kim Zianno, the House’s human resources director, put Cherry on notice three times for disciplinary infractions – the first two times for not properly clocking in and out of work, then a third time for working remotely without permission, according to written notices Zianno sent to Cherry. Cherry provided copies of those documents to The Plain Dealer/cleveland.com.

Cherry disputed that she failed to clock in and out, and that she broke any rules in her effort to work from home -- which Cherry said was motivated out of concern for her partner, who has a long-term health condition.

As a result of those infractions – as well as for calling then-state Rep. Reggie Stoltzfus, a Stark County Republican, “bro” in an all-House email – Zianno suspended Cherry for three days in 2022, according to a written notice. Cherry also claimed then-House Speaker Bob Cupp threatened to fire her.

In her federal complaint, Cherry wrote that she was “unaware of any male House employees who have been disciplined in this manner, where allegations are not tied to specific policies or conduct, or where termination is sought so quickly.”

Cherry also stated that she discovered “a disparity in how discipline was applied between men and women at the House.” She raised further objections after learning that a male House GOP lawyer was being paid 43% more than her, even though he was younger than her and had just been hired.

Cherry stated that she met twice with Russo and then-House Chief of Staff Jordan Plottner in July 2023 about her complaint that Zianno was targeting women for discipline.

Cherry said Russo called her repeated complaints “insubordination” and told her that “if she were in (Cherry’s) shoes, she would get over it.”

On July 28, 2023, Russo and Plottner told Cherry she was fired, though they agreed to Cherry’s request to resign at the end of the month in order to keep medical benefits a bit longer.

Rebuttal to Cherry's claims

An outside law firm, Perez Morris, stated in [a May 2023 report](#) that Cherry was “not unnecessarily targeted or monitored” and that no evidence was found showing any other House employee avoided discipline for infractions similar to what landed Cherry in trouble.

“Ms. Cherry may not agree with her discipline, or to the degree it was given, and she may think the policies she violated weren’t drastic enough to lead to discipline, but the policies listed in her discipline records were violated,” the report stated.

The law firm’s report also dismissed Cherry’s claim of pay discrimination. It notes that the male attorney had more responsibilities and experience than Cherry and that Cherry’s predecessor as House Democratic legal counsel -- a man -- was paid less than half of what his Republican counterpart made.

The 2023 Perez Morris report also stated that Cherry and Zianno have had a “well-known complicated history,” stemming from Cherry’s vocal disagreements with the House’s COVID-19 policy and then-House Speaker Larry Householder’s decision to [require House staffers to return to work at their offices](#) in May 2020.

“(Cherry) was very frustrated that she was unsuccessful in her attempts to have her prior discipline deleted from her personnel file,” a House attorney wrote in an official response to Cherry’s complaint. “It appears she allowed this frustration to completely distract her from her job duties. She became singularly focused on her campaign to delete her prior discipline.”

The House response stated there was “no reason” for Russo to retaliate against Cherry, given that her prior complaints were directed at Zianno. Russo’s decision to fire Cherry, the lawyer wrote, was based on Cherry’s job performance, not her past complaints.

Cherry, through an attorney, responded to the House’s letter in July 2024 sharply disputing most of its claims and claiming Perez Morris “rubber-stamped the House’s actions.”

Russo, in a Dec. 30 email to Democratic lawmakers and staff, stated that Cherry’s accusations “have been vigorously disputed and are unsupported by evidence.”

“It has been well-established that I take any complaints of harassment and a hostile work environment very seriously and do not hesitate to hold people accountable when the complaints are supported by evidence,” Russo wrote.

A Russo spokesman declined additional comment.

Zianno declined comment for this story via an Ohio House GOP spokeswoman.

Russo reelected

Cherry’s email to most House Democrats alerting them to her anti-discrimination report didn’t sway their caucus from voting unanimously on Jan. 6 to reelect Russo as minority leader.

State Rep. Darnell Brewer of Cleveland, one of the Democrats who got Cherry’s email, said it didn’t sway his vote for minority leader because he’s seen Russo stand up for other people in other situations.

“I think Russo has been a firm leader,” he said.